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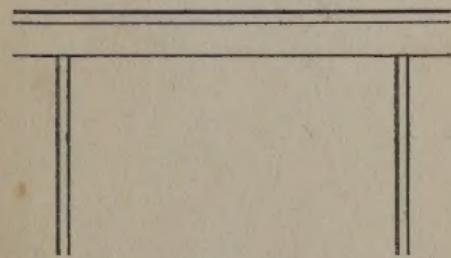
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• BY RUTH SUCKOW •

IOWA
INTER-
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NEW YORK

Fiction Catalog

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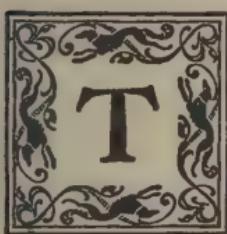
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IOWA INTERIORS

A Start in Life

I



HE Switzers were scurrying around to get Daisy ready by the time that Elmer Kruse should get through in town. They had known all week that Elmer might be in for her any day. But they hadn't done a thing until he appeared. "Oh, it was so rainy to-day, the roads were so muddy, they hadn't thought he'd get in until maybe next week." It would have been the same any other day.

Mrs. Switzer was trying now at the last moment to get all of Daisy's things into the battered telescope that lay open on the bed. The bed had not "got made"; and just as soon as Daisy was gone, Mrs. Switzer would have to hurry off to the Woodworths' where she was to wash to-day. Daisy's things were scattered over the dark brown quilt and the rumpled sheet that were dingy and clammy in this damp weather. So was the whole bedroom, with its sloping ceiling and old-fashioned square-paned windows, the commode that they used for a dresser, littered with pin tray, curlers, broken comb, ribbons, smoky lamp, all mixed up together; the door of the closet open, showing the confusion of clothes and shabby shoes. . . . They all slept in this room—Mrs. Switzer and Dwight in the bed, the two girls in the cot against the wall.

"Mamma, I can't find the belt to that plaid dress."

"Oh, ain't it somewhere around? Well, I guess you'll have to let it go. If I come across it I can send it out to you. Someone'll be going past there."

She had meant to get Daisy all mended and "fixed up" before she went out to the country. But somehow . . . oh, there was always so much to see to when she came home. Gone all day, washing and cleaning for other people; it didn't leave her much time for her own house.

She was late now. The Woodworths liked to have her get the washing out early so that she could do some cleaning too before she left. But she couldn't help it. She would have to get Daisy off first. She had already had on her wraps ready to go, when Elmer came—her cleaning cap, of a blue faded almost into grey, and the ancient black coat with gathered sleeves that she wore over her work dress when she went out to wash.

"What's become of all your underclothes? They ain't all dirty, are they?"

"They are, too. You didn't wash for us last week, mamma."

"Well, you'll just have to take along what you've got. Maybe there'll be some way of getting the rest to you."

"Elmers come in every week, don't they?" Daisy demanded.

"Yes, but maybe they won't always be bringing you in."

She jammed what she could into the telescope, thinking with her helpless, anxious fatalism that it would have to do somehow.

"Daisy, you get yourself ready now."

"I am ready. Mamma, I want to put on my other ribbon."

"Oh, that's way down in the telescope somewhere. You needn't be so anxious to fix yourself up. This ain't like going visiting."

Daisy stood at the little mirror preening herself—such a homely child, "all Switzer," skinny, with pale sharp eyes set close together and thin, stringy, reddish hair. But she had never really learned yet how homely she was. She was the oldest, and she got the pick of what clothes were given to the Switzers. Goldie and Dwight envied her. She was important in her small world. She was proud of her blue coat

that had belonged to Alice Brooker, the town lawyer's daughter. It hung unevenly about her bony little knees, and the buttons came down too far. Her mother had tried to make it over for her.

Mrs. Switzer looked at her, troubled, but not knowing how she could tell her all the things she ought to be told. Daisy had never been away before except to go to her Uncle Fred's at Lehigh. She seemed to think that this would be the same. She had so many things to learn. Well, she would find them out soon enough—only too soon. Working for other people—she would learn what that meant. Elmer and Edna Kruse were nice young people. They would mean well enough by Daisy. It was a good chance for her to start in. But it wasn't the same.

Daisy was so proud. She thought it was quite a thing to be "starting in to earn." She thought she could buy herself so much with that dollar and a half a week. The other children stood back watching her, round-eyed and impressed. They wished that they were going away, like Daisy.

They heard a car come splashing through the mud on low.

"There he is back! Have you got your things on? Goldie—go out and tell him she's coming."

"No, me tell him, me!" Dwight shouted jealously.

"Well—both of you tell him. Land! . . ."

She tried hastily to put on the cover of the bulging telescope and to fasten the straps. One of them broke.

"Well, you'll have to take it the way it is."

It was an old thing, hadn't been used since her husband, Mert, had "left off canvassing" before he died. And he had worn it all to pieces.

"Well, I guess you'll have to go now. He won't want to wait. I'll try and send you out what you ain't got with you." She turned to Daisy. Her face was working. There was nothing else to do, as everyone said. Daisy would have to help, and she might as well learn it now. Only, she hated to see Daisy go off, to have her starting in. She knew what it meant. "Well—you try and work good this summer, so

they'll want you to stay. I hope they'll bring you in sometimes."

Daisy's homely little face grew pale with awe, suddenly, at the sight of her mother crying, at something that she dimly sensed in the pressure of her mother's thin strong arms. Her vanity in her new importance was somehow shamed and dampened.

Elmer's big new Buick, mud-splashed but imposing, stood tilted on the uneven road. Mud was thick on the wheels. It was a bad day for driving, with the roads a yellow mass, water lying in all the wheel ruts. This little road that led past these few houses on the outskirts of town, and up over the hill, had a cold rainy loneliness. Elmer sat in the front seat of the Buick, and in the back was a big box of groceries.

"Got room to sit in there?" he asked genially. "I didn't get out, it's so muddy here."

"No, don't get out," Mrs. Switzer said hastily. "She can put this right on the floor there in the back." She added, with a timid attempt at courtesy, "Ain't the roads pretty bad out that way?"

"Yes, but farmers get so they don't think so much about the roads."

"I s'pose that's so."

He saw the signs of tears on Mrs. Switzer's face, and they made him anxious to get away. She embraced Daisy hastily again. Daisy climbed over the grocery box and scrunched herself into the seat.

"I guess you'll bring her in with you some time when you're coming," Mrs. Switzer hinted.

"Sure. We'll bring her."

He started the engine. It roared, half died down as the wheels of the car spun in the thick wet mud.

In that moment, Daisy had a startled view of home—the small house standing on a rough rise of land, weathered to a dim colour that showed dark streaks from the rain; the narrow sloping front porch whose edge had a soaked gnawed look; the chickens, greyish-black, pecking at the wet ground;

their playthings, stones, a wagon, some old pail covers littered about; a soaked, discoloured piece of underwear hanging on the line in the back yard. The yard was tussocky and overhung the road with shaggy long grass where the yellow bank was caved in under it. Goldie and Dwight were gazing at her solemnly. She saw her mother's face—a thin, weak, loving face, drawn with neglected weeping, with its reddened eyes and poor teeth . . . in the old coat and heavy shoes and cleaning-cap, her work-worn hand with its big knuckles clutching at her coat. She saw the playthings they had used yesterday, and the old swing that hung from one of the trees, the ropes sodden, the seat in crooked. . . .

The car went off, slipping on the wet clay. She waved frantically, suddenly understanding that she was leaving them. They waved at her.

Mrs. Switzer stood there a little while. Then came the harsh rasp of the old black iron pump that stood out under the box-elder tree. She was pumping water to leave for the children before she went off to work.

2

Daisy held on as the car skidded going down the short clay hill. Elmer didn't bother with chains. He was too used to the roads. But her eyes brightened with scared excitement. When they were down, and Elmer slowed up going along the tracks in the deep wet grass that led to the main road, she looked back, holding on her hat with her small scrawny hand.

Just down this little hill—and home was gone. The big car, the feel of her telescope under her feet, the fact that she was going out to the country, changed the looks of everything. She saw it all now.

Dunkels' house stood on one side of the road. A closed-up white house. The windows stared blank and cold between the old shutters. There was a chair with a broken straw seat under the fruit trees. The Dunkels were old Catholic people who seldom went anywhere. In the front yard was

a clump of tall pines, the rough brown trunks wet, the green branches, dark and shining, heavy with rain, the ground underneath mournfully sodden and black.

The pasture on the other side. The green grass, lush, wet and cold, and the outcroppings of limestone that held little pools of rain-water in all the tiny holes. Beyond, the low hills gloomy with timber against the lowering sky.

They slid out on to the main road. They bumped over the small wooden bridge above the swollen creek that came from the pasture. Daisy looked down. She saw the little swirls of foam, the long grass that swished with the water, the old rusted tin cans lodged between the rocks.

She sat up straight and important, her thin, homely little face strained with excitement, her sharp eyes taking in everything. The watery mudholes in the road, the little thickets of plum-trees, low and wet, in dark interlacings. She held on fiercely, but made no sound when the car skidded.

She felt the grandeur of having a ride. One wet Sunday, Mr. Brooker had driven them all home from church, she and Goldie and Dwight packed tightly into the back seat of the car, shut in by the side curtains against which the rain lashed, catching the muddy scent of the roads. Sometimes they could plan to go to town just when Mr. Pattey was going to work in his Ford. Then they would run out and shout eagerly, "Mr. Pattey! Are you going through town?" Sometimes he didn't hear them. Sometimes he said, with curt good nature, "Well, pile in"; and they all hopped into the truck back. "He says we can go along with him."

She looked at the black wet fields through which little leaves of bright green corn grew in rows, at showery bushes of sumach along the roadside. A gasolene engine pumping water made a loud desolate sound. There were somber-looking cattle in the wet grass, and lonely, thick-foliaged trees growing here and there in the pastures. She felt her telescope on the floor of the car, the box of groceries beside her. She eyed these with a sharp curiosity. There was a fresh pine-apple—something the Switzers didn't often get at

home. She wondered if Edna would have it for dinner. Maybe she could hint a little to Edna.

She was out in the country. She could no longer see her house even if she wanted to—standing dingy, streaked with rain, in its rough grass on the little hill. A lump came into her throat. She had looked forward to playing with Edna's children. But Goldie and Dwight would play all morning without her. She was still proud of her being the oldest, of going out with Elmer and Edna; but now there was a forlornness in the pride.

She wished she were in the front seat with Elmer. She didn't see why he hadn't put her there. She would have liked to know who all the people were who lived on these farms; how old Elmer's babies were; and if he and Edna always went to the movies when they went into town on Saturday nights. Elmer must have lots of money to buy a car like this. He had a new house on his farm, too, and Mrs. Metzinger had said that it had plumbing. Maybe they would take her to the movies, too. She might hint about that.

When she had gone to visit Uncle Fred, she had had to go on the train. She liked this better. She hoped they had a long way to go. She called out to Elmer:

“Say, how much farther is your place?”

“What's that?” He turned around. “Oh, just down the road a ways. Scared to drive in the mud?”

“No, I ain't scared. I like to drive most any way.”

She looked at Elmer's back, the old felt hat crammed down carelessly on his head, the back of his neck with the golden hair on the sunburned skin above the blue of his shirt collar. Strong and easy and slouched a little over the steering-wheel that he handled so masterfully. Elmer and Edna were just young folks; but Mrs. Metzinger said that they had more to start with than most young farmers did, and that they were hustlers. Daisy felt that the pride of this belonged to her too, now.

“Here we are!”

"Oh, is this where you folks live?" Daisy cried eagerly.

The house stood back from the road beyond a space of bare yard with a little scattering of grass just starting—small, modern, painted a bright new white and yellow. The barn was new too, a big splendid barn of frescoed brick, with a silo of the same. There were no trees. A raw desolate wind blew across the back yard as they drove up beside the back door.

Edna had come out on the step. Elmer grinned at her as he took out the box of groceries, and she slightly raised her eyebrows. She said kindly enough:

"Well, you brought Daisy. Hello, Daisy, are you going to stay with us this summer?"

"I guess so," Daisy said importantly. But she suddenly felt a little shy and forlorn as she got out of the car and stood on the bare ground in the chilly wind.

"Yes, I brought her along," Elmer said.

"Are the roads very bad?"

"Kind of bad. Why?"

"Well, I'd like to get over to mamma's some time to-day."

"Oh, I guess they aren't too bad for that."

Daisy pricked up her sharp little ears. Another ride. That cheered her.

"Look in the door," Edna said in a low fond voice, motioning with her head.

Two little round, blond heads were pressed tightly against the screen door. There was a clamour of "Daddy, daddy!" Elmer grinned with a half bashful pride as he stood with the box of groceries, raising his eyebrows with mock surprise and demanding: "Who's this? What you shoutin' 'daddy' for? You don't think daddy's got anything for you, do you?" He and Edna were going into the kitchen together, until Edna remembered and called back hastily:

"Oh, come in, Daisy!"

Daisy stood, a little left out and solitary, there in the kitchen, as Billy, the older of the babies, climbed frantically over Elmer, demanding candy, and the little one toddled





Daisy looked startled, a little scared and resentful. "Well, I don't know where you keep your bread."

"Don't you remember where I told you to put it this morning? Right over in the cabinet, in that big box. You must watch, Daisy, and learn where things are."

Elmer, a little embarrassed at the look that Edna gave him, whistled as he began to wash his hands at the sink.

"How's daddy's old boy?" he said loudly, giving a poke at the baby's chin.

As Edna passed him, she shook her head, and her lips just formed: "Been like that all morning!"

He grinned comprehendingly. Then both their faces became expressionless.

Daisy had not exactly heard, but she looked from one to the other, silent and dimly wondering. The queer ache that had kept starting all through the morning, under her interest in Edna's things and doings, came over her again. She sensed something different in the atmosphere than she had ever known before—some queer difference between the position of herself and of the two babies, a faint notion of what mamma had meant when she had said that this would not be visiting.

"I guess I'm going to have the toothache again," she said faintly.

No one seemed to hear her.

Edna whisked off the potatoes, drained the water. . . . "You might bring me a dish, Daisy." Daisy searched a long time while Edna turned impatiently and pointed. Edna put the rest of the things on the table herself. Her young, fresh, capable mouth was tightly closed, and she was making certain resolutions.

Daisy stood hesitating in the middle of the room, a scrawny, unappealing little figure. Billy—fat, blond, in funny, dark blue union-alls—was trotting busily about the kitchen. Daisy swooped down upon him and tried to bring him to the table. He set up a howl. Edna turned, looked astonished, severe.

"I was trying to make him come to the table," Daisy explained weakly.

"You scared him. He isn't used to you. He doesn't like it. Don't cry, Billy. The girl didn't mean anything."

"Here, daddy'll put him in his place," Elmer said hastily.

Billy looked over his father's shoulder at Daisy with suffused, resentful blue eyes. She did not understand it, and felt strangely at a loss. She had been left with Goldie and Dwight so often. She had always made Dwight go to the table. She had been the boss.

Edna said in a cool, held-in voice, "Put these things on the table, Daisy."

They sat down. Daisy and the other children had always felt it a great treat to eat away from home instead of at their own scanty, hastily set table. They had hung around Mrs. Metzinger's house at noon, hoping to be asked to stay, not offended when told that "it was time for them to run off now." Her pinched little face had a hungry look as she stared at the potatoes and fried ham and pie. But they did not watch and urge her to have more, as Mrs. Metzinger did, and Mrs. Brooker when she took pity on the Switzers and had them there. Daisy wanted more pie. But none of them seemed to be taking more, and so she said nothing. She remembered what her mother had said, with now a faint comprehension: "You must remember you're out working for other folks, and it won't be like it is at home."

After dinner, Edna said: "Now you can wash the dishes, Daisy."

She went into the next room with the children. Daisy, as she went hesitatingly about the kitchen alone, could hear Edna's low contented humming as she sat in there rocking, the baby in her lap. The bright kitchen was empty and lonely now. Through the window, Daisy could see the great barn looming up against the rainy sky. She hoped that they would drive to Edna's mother's soon.

She finished as soon as she could, and went into the dining-

room, where Edna was sewing on the baby, went on sewing. Daisy sat down and a queer low ache went all through her. She spoke in a dismal voice:

"I guess I got the toothache again."

Edna bit off a thread.

"I had it awful hard a while ago. Mamma come pretty near taking me to the dentist."

"That's too bad," Edna murmured politely. But she offered no other condolence. She gave a secret little smile at the baby asleep on a blanket and a pillow in one corner of the shiny leather davenport.

"Is Elmer going to drive into town to-morrow?"

"To-morrow? I don't suppose so."

"Mamma couldn't find the belt of my plaid dress and I thought if he was, maybe I could go along and get it. I'd like to have it."

Daisy's homely mouth drooped at the corners. Her toothache did not seem to matter to anyone. Edna did not seem to want to see that anything was wrong with her. She had expected Edna to be concerned, to mention remedies. But it wasn't toothache, that strange lonesome ache all over her. Maybe she was going to be terribly sick. Mamma wouldn't come home for supper to be told about it.

She saw mamma's face as in that last glimpse of it—drawn with crying, and yet trying to smile, under the old cleaning-cap, her hand holding her coat together. . . .

Edna glanced quickly at her. The child was so mortally unattractive, unappealing even in her forlornness. Edna frowned a little, but said kindly:

"Now you might take Billy into the kitchen out of my way, Daisy, and amuse him."

"Well, he cries when I pick him up," Daisy said faintly.

"He won't cry this time. Take him out and help him play with his blocks. You must help me with the children, you know."

"Well, if he'll go with me."

"I won't, won't he, Billy boy? Won't you go to the part?"

Daisy and then nodded. Daisy felt a thrill of compunction. She put his little fat hand in hers and trotted into the kitchen beside her. He had the fattest hands, she thought. Edna brought the blocks and put the box down on the floor beside Daisy.

"Now, see if you can amuse him so that I can get my sewing done."

"Shall you and me play blocks, Billy?" Daisy murmured.

He nodded. Then he got hold of the box with one hand, tipped out all the blocks on the floor with a bang and a rattle, and looked at her with a pleased proud smile.

"Oh, no, Billy. You mustn't spill out the blocks. Look, you're too little to play with them. No, now—now wait! Let Daisy show you. Daisy'll build something real nice—shall she?"

He gave a solemn nod of consent.

Daisy set out the blocks on the bright linoleum. She had never had such blocks as these to handle before. Dwight's were only a few old, unmatched, broken ones. Her spirit of leadership came back, and she firmly put away that fat hand of Billy's whenever he meddled with her building. She could make something really wonderful with these blocks.

"No, Billy, you mustn't. See, when Daisy's got it all done, then you can see what the lovely building is."

She put the blocks together with great interest. She knew what she was going to make—it was going to be a new house; no, a new church. Just as she got the walls up, in came that little hand again, and then with a delighted grunt Billy swept the blocks pell-mell about the floor. At the clatter, he sat back, pursing up his mouth to give an ecstatic "Ooh!"

"Oh, Billy—you mustn't, the building wasn't done! Look, you've spoiled it. Now you've got to sit 'way off here while I try to build it over again."

Billy's look of triumph turned to surprise and then to vociferous protest as Daisy picked him up and firmly trans-

planted him to another corner of the room. He set up a tremendous howl. He had never been set aside like that before. Edna came hurrying out. Daisy looked at Edna for justification, but instinctively on the defensive.

"Billy knocked over the blocks. He spoiled the building."

"Wah! Wah!" Billy gave loud heart-broken sobs. The tears ran down his fat cheeks and he held out his arms piteously toward his mother.

"I didn't hurt him," Daisy said, scared.

"Never mind, lover," Edna was crooning. "Of course he can play with his blocks. They're Billy's blocks, Daisy," she said. "He doesn't like to sit and see you put up buildings. He wants to play, too. See, you've made him cry now."

"Do' wanna stay here," Billy wailed.

"Well, come in with mother then," She picked him up, wiping his tears.

"I didn't hurt him," Daisy protested.

"Well, never mind now. You can pick up the blocks and then sweep the floor, Daisy. You didn't do that when you finished the dishes. Never mind," she was saying to Billy. "Pretty soon daddy'll come in and we'll have a nice ride."

Daisy soberly picked up the blocks and got the broom. What had she done to Billy? He had tried to spoil her building. She always made Dwight keep back until she had finished. Of course it was Daisy, the oldest, who should lead and manage. There had been no one to hear her side. Everything was different. She winked back tears as she swept, poorly and carelessly.

Then she brightened up as Elmer came tramping up on the back porch and then through the kitchen.

"Edna!"

"She's in there," Daisy offered.

"Want to go now? What! Is the baby asleep?" he asked blankly.

Edna gave him a warning look and the door was closed.

Daisy listened hard. She swept very softly. She could

catch only a little of what they said—“Kind of hate to go off . . . I know, but if we once start . . . not a thing all day . . . what we got her for . . .” She had no real comprehension of it. She hurried and put away the broom. She wanted to be sure and be ready to go.

Elmer tramped out, straight past her. She saw from the window that he was backing the car out from the shed. She could hear Edna and Billy upstairs, could hear the baby cry a little as he was wakened. Maybe she ought to go out and get on her wraps, too.

Elmer honked the horn. A moment later Edna came hurrying downstairs, in her hat and coat, and Billy in a knitted cap and red sweater crammed over his union-alls, so that he looked like a little Brownie. The baby had his little coat, too.

Edna called out: “Come in and get this boy, daddy.” She did not look at Daisy, but said hurriedly: “We’re going for a little ride, Daisy. Have you finished the sweeping? Well, then, you can pick up those pieces in the dining-room. We won’t be gone so very long. When it’s a quarter past five, you start the fire, like I showed you this noon, and slice the potatoes that were left, and the meat. And set the table.”

The horn was honked again.

“Yes! Well, we’ll be back, Daisy. Come, lover, daddy’s in a hurry.”

Daisy stood looking after them. Billy clamoured to sit beside his daddy. Edna took the baby from Elmer and put him beside her on the back seat. There was room—half of the big back seat. There wasn’t anything, really, to be done at home. That was the worst of it. They just didn’t want to take her. They all belonged together. They didn’t want to take anyone else along. She was an outsider. They all—even the baby—had a freshened look of expectancy.

The engine roared—they had started; slipping on the mud of the drive, then forging straight ahead, around the turn, out of sight.

She went forlornly into the dining-room. The light from the windows was dim now in the rainy, late afternoon. The pink pieces from the baby's rompers were scattered over the gay rug. She got down on her hands and knees, slowly picking them up, sniffing a little. She heard the Big Ben clock in the kitchen ticking loudly.

That dreadful ache submerged her. No one would ask about it, no one would try to comfort her. Before, there had always been mamma coming home, anxious, scolding sometimes, but worried over them if they didn't feel right, caring about them. Mamma and Goldie and Dwight cared about her—but she was away out in the country, and they were at home. She didn't want to stay here, where she didn't belong. But mamma had told her that she must begin helping this summer.

Her ugly little mouth contorted into a grimace of weeping. But silent weeping, without any tears; because she already had the cold knowledge that no one would notice or comfort it.

A Home-coming

I



PRING VALLEY was a town of retired farmers. One of those slow, pretty, leafy towns beside a quiet river, that seemed never to move at all.

Still, it was moving. The old settlers could sadly note changes here and there. In the last ten years it had been growing from a country town to a very small city. People had bridge parties instead of great suppers at the Grange. There was a new bank building with a Rest Room, a new Hotel, electroliers down Main Street; and gradually the two blocks of paving in the "business part" had lengthened out down East Street, down to where the houses began to straggle out and sweet clover to bank the roadsides. Building was chiefly on East Street. Square white houses with sleeping porches and stout white porch pillars. An occasional out-of-place bungalow, and a near-bungalow with the upper story painted yellow and the lower white. Here and there was a gaping wound in the earth where one of the old houses—low, painted dark, covered with wooden gingerbread—had been uprooted to make place for a new.

Automobiles went down this pavement, taking the Lincoln Highway to Golden Prairie.

Summer Street, a short cross street on which few houses faced, and which only the postman knew by name, went through East Street. It was almost forgotten. The unpaved road was too rutted for pleasure driving. The crossings were poor. After a few blocks the street went into a country road with a field on one side and willows on the

other, and ended with a dingy white farm-house with a sign: "Comb Honey for Sale."

There was a feeling of darkness on this little street, as in an old room. The trees had grown very large. Near the street corners their great twisted roots lay bare and grey on the dusty ground from which the grass had worn away. In the summer, leaf shadows flickered in and out across the grey road.

The houses were of the older type, of white frame mostly, and looked as if they had been long lived in. The bushes had spread out; weather-beaten chairs and stools stood out under the big trees. One house had a little spiked iron fence on the roof, above a border of green-painted shingles. Another had trimmings of dingy brown. One had a great pine-tree growing in front of the door. One was of brick with Gothic windows and a little Gothic porch painted yellow, so that it looked like a small Presbyterian church. The lawns had old-fashioned flowers grown too thick—petunias by the front walls, close to the damp stone foundations, cosmos and zinnias—and fruit-trees in the back yards. One expected old couples whose children had gone, or widows, or spinsters, to be living in these houses.

The old Haviland house was the largest on the street. It was built in a plain, spacious style that had worn well. But it had been closed for so long that it added to the faintly musty, gloomy atmosphere of Summer Street.

It was white, with long windows rounded at the top. It had a narrow porch with thin posts cut in a severe pattern. It was one of those houses "built on to," so that as one passed it from the side it kept lengthening out and out.

It was a corner house. There was a vacant pasture across the road from it, filled with dandelions all summer long, and with those silver-green plumy grasses.

At the side, two old blue-green fir-trees shed needles upon bare patches of earth. A forked catalpa-tree grew in the back yard, and bushes of lilac and syringa. Of all the flowers, only these bushes were left, and pink peonies beside

the front step; but short-stemmed blue violets grew wild at the edges of the sidewalk on the south. Old Man Shardlow cut the lawn and cared for the lilacs and syringas, and old Mrs. Shardlow picked the peonies.

At the back of the lot stood a large white barn with a round window in the front gable. From this a grape-hung trellis led to a tool-house, now leaning slightly with age.

Z

This June, people passing said:

"Some of the Havilands must be back. The place seems to be opened up."

The long, grey-green window-shades with fringed ends were up. A window was open. The panelled front door, although closed, no longer had a locked-up look.

"It must be Laura," they said, eyeing the place.

The Havilands were some of the very old residents of Spring Valley, but some of those who scatter and die away instead of growing great in the town. John Haviland had died so long ago that now only the old merchants spoke of him. His name was gone from the store. It was now: J. C. Fairweather, Dry Goods and Notions. But some old people still talked of going to Haviland's.

His son Ned had sold out the business years ago and gone West. He was known to have married there and to have gone into the automobile business in Denver. But he had practically cut loose from Spring Valley.

Mrs. Haviland, not long after her husband's death, had begun to travel. First she had gone to Europe, then she had begun to follow pleasant weather from State to State. She had spent her winters in Florida and California and her summers in the mountains. She had come back to Spring Valley only for a few months at a time, when her church had welcomed her, and her club, the Priscillas, had given a basket picnic for her. She said that she found the Iowa climate too trying. It was said of her that she had never been well.

Still, everyone was surprised when she had died two years ago; and old ladies meeting each other had cried, while still some distance apart: "Well, have you heard that Mrs. Haviland is dead?"

Since her death the house had not been opened.

Now it was discovered to be true that Laura Haviland was back.

Laura Haviland had always travelled with her mother, taking care of her. People wondered now whether she would stay, or "what she *would* do." She was "well fixed," they thought, and need not do anything. It was rather queer she hadn't stayed out West with her brother, but then you never could tell. Perhaps she would take up her music again.

Those who had seen her "this time" said that she looked better than she had "last time." The old lady, in the last few years especially, had been a lot of care.

They conjectured that Laura Haviland must now be thirty-six or seven. But since she had neither married nor taught school, she was still spoken of as Laura Haviland.

3

The old lady who lived in the Gothic house, and who knew everyone although almost everyone had forgotten her, was most interested in the opening of the Haviland house.

Conjecture as to what Laura Haviland meant to do gave her a new lease of life. She scrutinized various articles hung out to air, and kept a close watch for all comings and goings. There seemed to be so few of these that she was almost driven to stopping Old Mrs. Shardlow, to whom she "did not speak," but who was helping at the Havilands', and getting some information out of her.

"Now I just wonder—d'yous'pose she's goin' to stay? They ain't much baggage come—wonder why she don't stay with the brother," she kept pondering.

After a day or two she saw something that made her part the curtains and squint between them.

"Ain't that Mrs. Hubert Barr driving up to the Haviland place? She must be going to see Laura Haviland. Let's see, they was friends, wasn't they? Wasn't she one of the Wilson girls—or wasn't she? I b'lieve she was. Now, who did the other one marry?"

She was able to see Mrs. Hubert Barr bring her car skillfully to the curb and alight, and to note that she wore what seemed to be a white silk skirt and a sleeveless green satin jacket.

"My, how that young set does dress! Well, I guess she can afford it!" the old lady said—but she could not tell whether or not Mrs. Barr went into the Havilands'.

But she did go up the walk that was slightly sunken and grass-grown, and mounted the shallow step to the porch. She rang the bell which pulled out with a little jagged brass handle. It gave a worn, gasping clank that jarred the panels of the door slightly.

Mrs. Barr glanced coolly about her. When softened footsteps sounded from within, her attitude became expectant.

As soon as the door was opened, she stepped quickly inside, cried: "Well—Laura!" and she and Laura Haviland kissed warmly.

They stood for a moment in the chill of the long, dark hallway, then passed through an archway into the front room.

The room seemed spacious because of the high ceiling. It had always a kind of dusk and coolness, and just now a dimly musty air. The furniture was miscellaneous, added to at different times, yet all gave the effect of old-fashioned darkness. There were several chairs with oval backs, upholstered in brown, an arm-chair and a ~~tee~~ ~~tee~~ vered satiny stuff, a mahogany table and cabinet, a b ~~ee~~ rble fire-place. An oil painting—*Autumn Woods*—done by a sister of Mrs. Haviland's, hung in a massive silvered frame. Another high archway opened into the further gloom of the living-room, where a grand piano and a two-part cherry-wood table were just visible.

Mrs. Barr sat down on the oval-backed settee, and Laura Haviland sat near her. Now the warmth and cheer of their first embrace died away. They were conscious of familiar things and changes in each other.

Laura Haviland had changed little since Mrs. Barr had last seen her, but very much since what seemed the days of the real Laura Haviland, the Spring Valley days. Then, there had always been an effect of joyousness about her—spring and apple blossoms. Now, even her smile left a lingering impression of sadness.

She was still slender, with something of girlishness about her if not youth. She was fragile and worn, and it seemed somehow pitiful that this should be so—it made one angry at the world. Her face, thin and subtly faded, had a rare quality of sweetness. The skin that had been like apple blossoms was fine still, but a little drawn. Under the eyes there were faint bluish-brown shadows like old bruises. The eyes, perhaps because of these shadows and the lids, made one see them as violet, although their colour was grey-blue. Blue veins were traced on her slender hands, veins of blue and lilac at the temples. Her hair was parted, very fine, brown, and turned to silver-gold at the sides.

She wore dark-blue silk, finely and yet not really fashionably made, as if she did not quite dare fashion.

Mrs. Barr was a contrast—firmness and vigour, modishness, with thick auburn hair and a fresh, coarse skin, her strong hand with its familiar emerald ring stroking carelessly the rough white silk of her skirt.

Yet it was as the old lady remembered—they had been friends, and there had been no incongruity.

There was suddenly a vague sense of embarrassment between them. To break it, Mrs. Barr said abruptly:

“Why didn’t you let a fellow know you were back?”

Laura smiled at something characteristic in the question.

“Well, I meant to, Gertrude, but somehow I haven’t got straightened around enough yet to do anything. I’ve only been here two days.”

"Come Tuesday?"

"Monday."

"Oh, yes, of course!"

Laura touched her hands softly together on her knee and looked into the dimness of the living-room. The fir branches outside grated faintly against each other.

Gertrude moved restlessly and said, with an effort of effort:

"We expected you a long while ago."

"Yes, I suppose so." Laura looked slightly embarrassed. "I expected it myself. It's dreadful to let things go so long. But Mabel had her break-down, and it seemed they needed me. I might have come before—but there's so much to see to here!"

She glanced anxiously about the orderly rooms, where both were conscious of a bareness and an odour of neglect.

"Haven't Grandpa and Grandma Shardlow done their duty?" Mrs. Barr asked flippantly.

"Oh, yes, they've kept things nicely. But it isn't the same."

"No."

There were things missing in the room—the cloisonné vase which had always stood on the cabinet, the calla lily on the marble-topped stand by the south window, and other things which could not be named but which left an emptiness.

"The petunias in front are all gone," Laura said sadly. "There'll be none of our old flowers left soon, I'm afraid."

"You must stay and look after them."

"Yes—" A look of reserve came over Laura's face.

Mrs. Barr scrutinized her from behind an apparently careless air. It was evident that Laura had been working herself to death again for someone—Ned's wife, that "Mabel," probably. Mrs. Barr stigmatized Mabel as "a piece." She had always felt angry with Ned and Mrs. Haviland for simply running over Laura the way they did, but now she was angry with Laura herself. Laura was her own mistress now. There was no need of it. She should look after herself. She broke out accusingly:

"I thought that *this* time I'd see you looking like yourself. But you're all tired out again as usual. What was it —Mrs. Ned's break-down?"

"Oh, no!" said Laura, flushing a faint rose. "Mabel has been better for some time. I haven't been doing much anyway, at any time. It was more to have me there."

Then, feeling an implied criticism of "Mrs. Ned," she said:

"Mabel is such a wonderful person. You'd like her, Gertrude. There isn't anything she can't do. That's the trouble—she does too much. But she is so much in demand —she's very popular in Denver."

Mrs. Barr raised her eyebrows courteously but unbelievingly.

Laura flushed and was silent.

"Now that you're here, you'd better take a real rest for once," Mrs. Barr observed. "Heaven knows you've come to the place for it! There's nothing, absolutely nothing—I've never known even Spring Valley to be so hopeless."

"Oh, tell me about things!" Laura seized upon the topic with eager relief. "Something's happened, I'm sure. I know it always seems when I come as if everything's happened."

"Well, let's see. Yes, I suppose it would seem as if even Spring Valley had moved, to anyone who's been away—You heard about the Baptist church burning, of course."

"Oh, yes, I heard about that. It's such a shame. Will they ever build it up again, do you suppose?"

"I don't know," Mrs. Barr said lightly. "They have about ten members, I think—eleven, counting the janitor."

"Why, they used to have a good congregation, didn't they?"

"Oh, my dear, no one goes to church any more except the Methodists. They always seem to for some reason or other."

"I haven't heard anything for so long," Laura said. "I always used to count on Mrs. Bird to write me things, but

since her eyes have failed so, she hasn't been able to write. I'm afraid she's grown very feeble, dear old lady."

Laura's voice died away sadly. Again they heard the fir branches grating.

Mrs. Barr had almost forgotten old Mrs. Bird. Mention of her gave her a sense of how long Laura had been away. Old Mrs. Bird was no longer in the life of Spring Valley.

"Don't you get the wonderful *Signal*?" she asked.

"Not since it's changed hands. So many of mother's old friends used to write to her, and in that way I heard things, but of course——"

"Well, I suppose you want to hear about the old crowd first," Mrs. Barr said briskly. "Not that there's much to tell. Of course you know that Jim and Agnes have separated?"

"They have—finally?"

"Oh, yes, it's come to that. And I'm glad of it. When two people can't be in the same room together without bickering, it's time to make ways part. Why, Laura, I've seen Jim and Agnes go to Thursday Club, one on one side of the street and one on the other, and then go up the steps as if they'd come together. That's a fact. And now since Jim's taken up with this Miss Finch—oh, my dear, didn't you know that? Oh, yes, it's common gossip. She's the damsel who has the new millinery department at Ewing's. Well, I can see what there is about her—but just the same, that doesn't excuse Jim."

She went on with numerous items of "Jen," "Clara," "Ed," "Harry," recounting deaths, births and supposed love affairs, an occasional abrupt "Oh, Burts have built their new house," or "Rawsons have a new car at last. I suppose Jen wouldn't give Austin any peace until he finally gave in to it." Lawrence Parsons had "failed," she said. And "wasn't it dreadful about Mr. Goodlake? The last person on earth you would have dreamed could have taken a cent that didn't belong to him. It simply broke Hubert all up." Old houses had been sold, new ones built; the Bissells had sold

out and gone to California; the Kleins had moved in from the country; Herbert Nixon had been killed in France; old Mrs. Burt had died, and the old man wouldn't last much longer; so many of the old residents had died off lately.

As Laura listened, a web of sad-tinged thoughts floated dreamily through her mind. Everything was so familiar. At the same time she seemed great distances away.

The painful things seemed in so much greater proportion than the pleasant. Every time that she came back to Spring Valley there were more. It seemed to her that of all the "old crowd," only Gertrude had been fortunate. Alice, too, was prosperous and very gay; but her little son had been burned to death and there was always a kind of wild glitter in her eyes. Mary was dead, Jim and Agnes were unhappy, no one knew what had become of Oswald, Vanchie had "lost her husband" and was working in Oklahoma, Selma had gone insane. It seemed to her that she was far from all these things. But she had not lived at all.

She watched Gertrude as she talked. Gertrude was wholly absorbed. She was on familiar ground now. This was her life. She was entirely unaware of Laura's sense of painful detachment—she took it for granted evidently that Laura was as absorbed as she.

"I don't know—I've been away so long," Laura would have to say at intervals. Gertrude would look at her uncomprehendingly and go on.

Gertrude was settled now. It was in her air, in the expression of her eyes, not in her firm, trim body which had seemingly not grown a day older. It was that she was no longer receptive. She was fixed. She expected nothing.

Laura thought: "I am not fixed. But do I expect anything?"

A terrible weariness came over her.

She could see that Gertrude took the kind of interest in all these details that she remembered her mother and her mother's friends had taken when she had heard them talking years ago, in this same room. What was it?—It was that

they were bounded by the world they spoke of. Gertrude was bounded now by Spring Valley. Before, her tales had been dramatic; she had not been quite absorbed.

She observed that Gertrude avoided Mark Edwards's name whenever she could, and that when she did speak it her tone was conscious. It was a part of what Gertrude could not comprehend. She had been away from Mark so long. It seemed strange that Gertrude should still be thinking of him in connexion with her. He was no longer in her heart. But there was an emptiness there.

Yet, after all, there was a kind of consciousness of him that enveloped her whenever she came to Spring Valley—ghostly, like the sense of her old life in this place, a kind of mist. It was vaguely mingled with the leafiness and dimness, the scent of syringa-bushes. It came over her at strange moments—when the light fell a certain way across the black top of the piano, when she passed the big oak at Wilson's corner, when the breeze came in at her window in the morning and stroked her skin mysteriously. Not the thought of Mark exactly—rather the memory of a thought—an elusive pain.

“I must go. Heavens!”

Gertrude glanced at her wrist-watch.

“My infants are howling at this moment.”

“Oh!” Laura exclaimed in dismay. “Why, Gertrude, I haven't asked after them. How is Doris? Does she still have a beautiful dark bang? And the little one I've never seen. Think of it! Jane Elizabeth—”

“Um-hum!” Gertrude's eyebrows went up significantly. “Don't you run away without seeing that young prodigy this time. Doris asked me this morning if I was going to see Aunt Laura.”

Soft rose flooded Laura's cheeks again. “Oh, Gertrude, why didn't you bring her?”

“Oh, my dear, I'd rather go nowhere than attempt to take that child. She's inherited all her mother's wickedness. It's a judgment on me.”

"Nonsense!" Laura laughed. "I'll risk her."

Her lips grew wistful. It seemed to her that she had more in common with Gertrude's children than with Gertrude. Her heart ached at the thought of Doris as she had seen her last—solemn dark eyes and a bang lying like a soft, dark cloud on her pearly forehead. But Doris was older now—perhaps not so poignantly, woundingly sweet. Now, there was little Jane Elizabeth—

Laura followed Gertrude out into the hallway. It was even darker than the parlour. The musty smell was stronger.

Gertrude turned.

"Now, Laura, come to see me."

"Indeed, Gertrude, I'll try to."

Laura tried not to feel the effort with which they both spoke. Trying to revive something that was past. Did Gertrude understand it? There was a kind of half-heartedness when she said: "Don't you let anyone work you to death now."

Laura glanced half-humorously, half-sadly, about the empty place. "I don't think anyone will."

Gertrude shivered—turned it into a shrug.

"I don't see how you can stay here alone. Can't you get someone to stay with you—nights at least? Old Mrs. Bird—wouldn't she?" she asked vaguely.

"Oh, no." Laura smiled sadly to herself. Old Mrs. Bird—she had scarcely gone beyond her own front step for years. "I don't mind it at all, really."

"You must come to our house whenever you do. Any time."

"Thanks, Gertrude. That's lovely of you. But I don't mind—really."

Gertrude looked unconvinced.

The white-tipped pegs of the old hall seat gleamed weirdly through the dim light. Wraps had hung upon them once—Ned's caps, Laura's straw hat with roses, her little jacket. Ned had run in and out of this hall, banging the door which

had never dared look so austere, so slow to move, in those days. But those days were so very long ago. Scarcely possible.

The vision of Mrs. Haviland was everywhere in the house. Gertrude could see her, as she meant to tell Alice, with a shiver—her figure, plump and slumped together, in black with a lace collar, her face a moist white, multitudinously wrinkled, with a bagging double chin, her small, slightly reddened silver-backed comb stuck into the thin strands at the back, the neat crimps in front. Laura always close, tired and yet gently eager, hovering over her. Gertrude meant to tell Alice that Laura was “terribly faded,” “all used up.”

“You simply can’t get away from her in that house. I don’t see how Laura can stay there,” she would say.

A look of curiosity came into her eyes. She carefully kept it from her voice as she said:

“Perhaps you’ll go on with your music now.”

“I don’t know. I haven’t decided—I must put my affairs in order here before I do anything.”

Laura was again reserved; a perception of that lurking curiosity came upon her—Gertrude curious, caring about details!—how terribly disappointing life could be. Gertrude would tell someone else, they would talk. She felt slightly sick. She remembered how she had slept with Gertrude, how they had laughed and whispered half the night—then Mr. Wilson’s stentorian “You girls go to sleep or I’ll take a stick to you both!” from his bedroom, and Gertrude smothering her laugh in the pillow until she snorted.

“Are you free on Friday? Could you come to us for dinner?” Gertrude asked somewhat formally.

“Thank you, Gertrude. I’d like to very much.”

“We usually eat at six—Hubert gets home about then. But come early.”

“Well, if I can—I’m so anxious to see the children. Hubert too. I haven’t asked about him. How is he?”

“Oh, *pretty* well,” Gertrude said disparagingly. “He kills

himself for that old bank—but then no power on earth can keep him from it. Well, you come!"

She was brisk again, full of the business of getting away.

Laura stood in the doorway, a smile fixed uncomfortably upon her lips, until the car was gone.

When she had closed the door, the lonely silence of the hall was like her own element after a strange one.

But gradually it seemed to engulf her in a heavy sadness. The thick, stale air was unbroken, the chairs all waiting for something.

She wandered into the living-room. Two pale bars of light shone upon the floor from under the window-shade—wavered, retreated. The old brown clock should have been ticking in the kitchen—as on her mother's club days when she had come home from school into the empty house, a sweet warm emptiness, time of her own. Time of her own now—all of it. The fir branches grated outside.

She sat down on the old brown carpet and leaned her head against the leather couch that stood by the three windows. The things that Gertrude had told her repeated themselves in her mind. Jim, Agnes, Selma, Alice—she felt wounded, hurt all over.

She kept seeing Gertrude with painful acuteness—the things she had always liked—brisk, strong movements, reddish-brown hair growing crisply up from the temples—these things hurt because of the small, settled look in Gertrude's eyes. There was no longer Gertrude to look forward to here. That was over. The heart was gone out of it. She felt that they would always have to be very polite, and pretend they did not know, until their old intimacy had gradually, decorously died out of itself.

Not even old Mrs. Bird—feeble, no longer acute, telling the same stories over and over again.

She was at home. She looked about the room—familiar, unfamiliar. More real than any other place, and yet not real at all. Part present, part past.

Six by her watch.

"I must eat," Laura whispered.

She put her hand on the couch to raise herself and went slowly out into the strange, dusty loneliness of the kitchen.

The old lady in the Gothic house, as soon as she heard the sound of the car, had hobbled from her kitchen, where she was frying potatoes, to the window.

"Hm! That's where she *did* go, all right. I thought so," she said.

4

Dusk was like a deepening of the gloom in the old Haviland house.

Laura put away the old brown-rimmed dishes that she was using while she was "by herself." She took up the book that she had brought from Denver, that Mabel had called delightful—a hard, brilliant thing, as hard as glass. Its hardness, and sureness, hurt her. She put it down. Where were books tender enough for her weariness? "Cranford"—but there was something deeper than "Cranford." Where were books tender; and yet deep?

After a while she wandered outside.

Twilight came early to the shaded dimness of Summer Street. The west, behind Parsons' house across the street, was still rose-tinged, the rest of the sky dove-grey. Cars sounded—but they seemed a long way off. The wet grass was full of insects; there was a twitter of birds about the house.

The old Shardlows sat in two dingy chairs on their porch, never saying a word to each other. That was more lonely than solitude. These houses were full of old people.

Laura went into the back yard, which had once been full of flowers. Now there were only the bushes, and the lilacs were all gone now, the syringa petals fallen. Yet there was a faint scent of them—a thought of Mark . . . The grass under the catalpa-tree was sprinkled with white, ruffly

blossoms etched in sepia. The forked trunk showed black against the evening sky. The fir-trees were a blur of bluish dusk.

Barn swallows swooped in low curves about the gable of the barn. Insects were thick about the grape-vine on the trellis. The old tool-house seemed to lean farther, wearily.

The grass had a crust of dew. Laura picked her way to the walk at the side—it ended with a Haviland lot. As she looked down she discovered one dark-blue violet still blooming in its nest of shadowy leaves. She exclaimed softly, bent down, but did not pick it.

“Darling—beautiful,” she whispered.

These violets they had brought from the woods long ago. She and Mary had planted them. They had meant to have a border all along the walk, as in English gardens. But these were wild violets—they had scattered themselves through the grass in their own shy, vagrant way; and they still came up each spring for little girls to find.

“I wonder if the spring beauties——” Laura thought.

Spring beauties—tender, pink-white, on thin, dark, glossy stems. . . . She hurried to the north of the house, and half knelt, feeling about with her hand on the wet black earth beside the little cobwebbed cellar window. The lilac-bushes made it dark here. The spring beauties were gone—the grass grew up to the space of bare mould next to the house foundation.

It was terribly silent there. Laura turned and fled into the house.

She lit the reading-lamp in the living-room, leaving the corners of the room in shadow. She did not want to read.

She opened the black cover of the grand piano, sat down and touched softly a few of the yellowish keys.

“Oh, I can’t *play*,” she thought in distress.

Her fingers stayed on the keys. She felt a strange powerlessness to make them move. Not in the fingers themselves—somewhere within herself.

“Go on with your music now . . .” Gertrude had said.

Ned, too, when their mother had died—"Laura must take up her music again." She felt music as a great load, and she trying to lift it—but stuck tight to the ground, grass-grown, like a stone she had seen somewhere.

She thought dispassionately that now she could do what she had sat here longing to do, years ago, here on this bench —she could go to Boston and study. She had money, if she used it carefully. Yet a feeling deeper than any resolution or desire said that she would not.

She could go anywhere. To Florida, grey moss and strange flowers . . . the Rockies, Oregon, California, the beach. If someone in one of these places would send for her. . . . But no one would. Mabel would send for her, and she would go back to Denver, then here again. She was not happy here. But she knew it. It was not going on from place to place.

She thought of herself at twenty, when her mother and she had left the first time for Florida. How she had felt aching, bleeding, as if she had been torn up by the roots. How she had said to Mark: "We will *certainly* be home in the spring." So they had—and then had had to go again. Her mother's need of her creeping about her like tendrils, fastening on her and holding her tight. She had said to Mark: "I feel . . . it isn't fair to you"—and his always unbelievable acquiescence. That same year he had married a girl from Fort Weston.

But suppose he had waited . . . until now? She knew how people had said that her mother made a slave of her. Old Mrs. Bird saying: "You will have your reward, Laura, dear," so wisely.

All these things she surveyed with a sad wonder. She wished she could feel again the aching heart of the earlier days. There was almost fear when she felt how her energies had been sapped. Her life seemed drawn out of her.

She spread out her white fingers—large-knuckled, a musician's fingers—moved them up and down in one of her old finger exercises. They were supple still . . . lifeless.

When her watch said nine she permitted herself to go to bed.

She lay on the little white iron bed that had been her girlhood bed.

The air came softly in, as it had done then, upon her bare arms and neck; and with it the scent of the night.

In all the empty house there was no one to call for her. She could sleep now, as she had so often longed to do. But this was surely not freedom. She could wish for that passionate care of her mother that had kept her sense of life. She had been of use, even if worked beyond all limits of her strength.

What could make her wish to wake in the morning? Mark—that again? She could not even wish for Mark—that was dead. Someone else. . . . Oh, no, that was impossible even for desire. If there were some small thing in a little bed?

Her eyes stared wide into the lilac dusk. It was true, it had come to pass—what she had been born for was not hers.

Nothing was hers, but the old house, the trees, the fallen petals on the lawn.

5

It was such a warm, still night—everything hushed with a beautiful secret silence. Until very late the motor cars went up and down East Street, where the clock in the courthouse tower hung pale in the dusk like a moon. White bands of light went ahead of them and lighted a curb or a tree.

One full of boys and girls rolled smoothly, blithely along. The boy at the wheel made a tentative turn at Summer Street, where the big trees stood mysteriously pleasant. One of the girls called out petulantly:

“Oh, no, Bob! Not down there. That’s such a rutty old road.”

“Aw—looks nice.”

"Um-um, Bob." Another boy's voice. "Doesn't go anywhere."

"No, of course it doesn't. There's a house at the end. Go on straight."

"Oh, all right. If you know so much. . . ."

The car sped lightly on. The brief radiance of the big corner tree was quenched again in shadows.

The Daughter

I



PEOPLE used to ask how Mary Lane could stand it. She looked so delicate herself, tall and slender, with her large pale blue eyes behind the thick lenses of her glasses, and her wide drawn mouth. Ever since she was a child she had waited hand and foot on her mother.

Mrs. Lane was neither poorly nor ailing nor in a bad way. Half the women in Shell Spring were that, it seemed. She was a Real Invalid. On soft warm days she crawled out to her little porch and sat in a big rocker in the shadow of the clematis vine. Then her neighbours came up to her and told her how glad they were to see her able to be out, while they tried to hide from her their shock at the sight of her, bent and shrunken, her skin stretched like yellow tissue paper over the bones, and the veins crawling over her sunken temples. She looked so much worse outdoors in the light.

"I didn't realize," they would murmur to each other afterward. "Well, she can't last much longer."

And when she did, outliving many younger and stronger women, and when every summer saw her out again, they declared that it was a miracle.

She looked much more natural in the old sitting-room of her little house, where she had sat so long that the place belonged to her. Her chair caught the light from the west window. Her plants, which Mary tended for her, filled the other window. Her footstool—a box covered with the remnants of the red-flowered ingrain carpet—stood before her

chair. Beside it, the little walnut table that held her spectacles, the chequered box in which she kept her pills, and the big soft rag that she held to her mouth when she coughed. She was in the air of the room—close, slightly stale, with an ancient smell that came from medicine, from the carpet, the painted woodwork warped and crackled with heat.

Her complaint was mysterious. Sometimes women whispered it to other women. The other women shook their heads significantly, murmuring: "Is that so? Well, I just thought—"

They said it was because she had worked herself to death when she was a girl. She had been one of the Welterlens, the oldest girl in a family of ten. She had brought up all the rest of them. Her mother was not strong, and always too busy to attend to the children after they were once born.

Mary spoke of it only as "mamma's trouble." Mary had to get up in the dead of night, shivering across the bare icy floor, to heat water on the gasolene stove in the kitchen. She could hardly ever leave that dingy little white house. Church meetings were her only dissipations.

It had always been so. Mr. Lane had been dead for many years. He had left them just enough to scrape along on. And even when he was living he had not helped much, believing such things to be woman's duty. It had always fallen upon Mary. She had had no childhood or girlhood, it seemed. Always, when the other girls had asked her to do anything, it had been: "Mamma needs me." She had gone on patiently, lovingly, with no recompense that could be seen, and scarcely a word of appreciation. In all those years she had never done anything just as she should. It was always: "No, no, you're hurting me! Why did you do that? Where have you been?"—with reproachful moans that cut Mary to the heart.

Mary could not even have the gift of loneliness in the nights. She had to sleep with her mother in the stuffy little bedroom off the sitting-room. Her mother was nervous if she was gone a moment. She dared not turn all

night. The slightest creak of the bed awakened the invalid. Everything wakened her—the front door that had creaked for years, the dropping of coal in the stove. She would start up, rigid: "Mary! What's that? Go see." If Mary paused for a moment to see the stars through the syringa-bush outside the window, there came that high, fretful call from the bed: "Mary! Why don't you come? You know I can't rest until you do."

There were bluish-brown shadows under Mary's eyes, her nostrils were pinched, the veins stood out on her thin hands. She looked ready to drop, the women who watched her said. They wondered how she could stand it.

2

But Mary did stand it. She was always there, always helpful, always ready. The strange inner flame of tenderness that some women have, seemed to sustain her. Perhaps it was because it went on and on, imperceptibly, so that she only realized for sudden gasping moments how far life had gone. At any rate she was never impatient, never angry. And she had learned the comfort of little things.

The hour in the afternoon when Mrs. Johnson sat with her mother she was free. Sometimes she stopped in to see Lily Peterson and her children; sometimes to see old Mrs. Watts. It was an adventure for her to enter another house, she was so seldom away from home. Or she went to the library, looking over the row of recently acquired fiction with a sense of adventure and promise. She liked refined, kindly books with troubles, but with the certainty of the women all being satisfactorily married in the end. Or a nice book of travel, illustrated—one of Stoddard's "Lectures."

These things took her away from her own sorrows:

The two hours in the morning when the sun shone in a patterned square on the kitchen floor. The warm silence of the kitchen when the brown clock ticked loudly and the Leghorn rooster crowed drowsily in the yard. Or the after-

noons when she sat beside the stove in her low cane-seated rocking-chair, reading and waiting for the bread to bake. The delicious smell of fresh bread, and the warm house-wifely feel of it when she took it out of the oven and turned the loaves out upon the kitchen table. Church. Prayer meeting, where she was one of the handful of the faithful. Missionary meetings, to which sometimes she could go, with their chatter, fancy work and the odour of coffee from the kitchen. . . .

And she liked to have her flock of Leghorns come strutting with absurd haste when she went out to the back yard, poking their necks in and out; and to carry the warm fresh eggs to the house through the sunshine.

Deeper things: The dependence of her mother upon her in the night, in the dark of the stuffy bedroom, the touch of her hot frail hands. . . .

This was her work, her task. It had always been. Life and the spirit could not prosper unless it were fulfilled. She felt as deep a loyalty, a responsibility, to her mother as she would have felt to her child. They called her a perfect daughter, and in this she felt a sad pride.

And then there was the yearly budding of the green things and flowers that grew about the house in old-fashioned abundance—the three apple-trees in the back yard, the lilacs and all the roses, the syringa-bush beside the bedroom window, the cosmos, the hardy pinks, the tiger-lilies and zinnias. Yet there was a sadness in that recurrent blossoming, a sense of time passing, and unfulfilment. The fragrance of the syringa in the warm night was over-sweet.

3

But it was Henry who kept her lingering sense of youth alive. Mary had been engaged to Henry for so many years that even interested old ladies could hardly calculate the time. It had begun in high school. They were both quiet and hard-working, and had drifted naturally together.

Henry was one of the Acreses, who had a farm near Sandy Creek. He was a clerk now in the J. B. Boardman hardware store, but he had never lost the country look. His hands and feet were clumsy. His shoulders were thick and slightly bowed. His eyes were soft, dark, mute, like the eyes of farm animals.

Everyone in town spoke of him as Henry Acres. He was treated as an old boy, never as a man. He was now a little grey—it gave his thick hair a dusty look—and there were two deep, deliberate creases in his forehead. He wore shabby coats and trousers that did not match. He always thought of himself as a boy. He was called good and reliable and steady-going. He could always be counted upon—in the store, in the Congregational church, where he had long been an usher. For this reason no one troubled to be particularly courteous to him. He was always treasurer of the Sunday School, known as a thankless job. He dished out ice cream at the Sunday School picnic and kept the little boys from the river. He was one of the six or seven in the church who still went to prayer meeting. For years he had met Mary there and they had walked home together.

No one thought of them as either lovers or married people, although they were treated as a combination of the two. They were simply spoken of as "Henry and Mary." They were accepted in that rôle as one of the institutions of the town. Once in a while someone said: "Do you suppose they will ever get married?" But usually it was forgotten that they had ever contemplated it.

Besides prayer-meeting night, which was Thursday, Henry came on Mondays to see Mary. Then he fixed the stove, the doors, whatever was out of order. If Mrs. Johnson came over, they sometimes walked to the library together. Not down Lovers' Lane, a little side road bordered with willow-trees, because they somehow hated to meet the high-school girls and boys who walked there. They felt out of place among them. In warm weather they sat on the porch and talked very softly together.

On such nights Mrs. Lane was usually worse and had one of her spells before morning. She always suspected that they had been talking about her. It seemed very hard to her, she sometimes told one of the sympathizing neighbours, that with all she had to bear she had to have Henry too. She might have had her daughter left to her, at least. The Lord was too cruel. They consoled her by assuring her that Mary was a good daughter and would never marry while her mother needed her. But Mrs. Lane said bitterly that Mary would get married and forget all about her as soon as she was dead. Well, it would not be long. That was the only mention made now of Mary's marriage.

Mary dreaded these nights. They made her feel guilty. But she would not give up Henry. Her loyalty clung to him also. Henry was still to her the awkward, slow, good-hearted country boy whom she had pitied and loved in school. She dared not think of him otherwise. But sometimes she felt obscurely guilty about him, too.

He had no one to look after him. There were spots on his coat, and little hairs sprinkling his coat collar. Sometimes he ushered with unblacked shoes. Such things were never offensive to her. They made her heart yearn over him. He needed her. He lived in a room over the real-estate office. How the place must look! Henry had promised to sweep twice a week, but she was sure that he never got into the corners. What must his cooking be! He made his own breakfasts and got his dinners and suppers at Mrs. Stonebarger's boarding-house. Mary sent over fresh bread wrapped in dish towels, jelly, cookies and eggs. Henry carried them home after dark, for they both felt that it would not do to have people see him with these things. In summer she gave him flowers. Poor fellow! He never seemed to know what to do with them, but was shyly pleased at having them. It never occurred to him to decorate his room. Mary did all his washing for him, except his collars and Sunday shirts. She knew that he would have let such things accumulate for ever.

But sometimes she felt, guiltily, that these things were not enough. Tears came to her eyes when she watched him go trudging back to his lonely room on bleak winter nights. It was no life for him at all. Sometimes Bessie, "the sister who had stayed at home," drove in from the country and brought him honey and fruit from the farm. Mary was indignant that, with all the abundance on the farm, they did not bring him more. But that was the trouble with Henry. He never put himself forward. It was the same with everyone. They did not give him his due. No one appreciated him, except herself. And sometimes she felt that this was her fault.

But what could she do? To leave her mother was impossible. Years ago she had cried about it, when she could hide somewhere away from the sound of her mother's voice. She had felt pulled two ways, and that the thing must end. But she had gradually become used to the situation, and Henry too. He was so patient. He understood. He seldom troubled her, never urged her any more. But she could see that he was angry and shamed when John Nash called out to them after prayer meeting: "Well, well, you two young ones going off like this! Don't you think you need a chaperon?"

She saw how people treated him, and it filled her heart with remorseful pain. But she could not think about it. She could not leave her mother, and her mother would never let Henry live with them.

He had not always been so patient. She remembered how he used to flare up at her. Then, when her mother had reproached him for being so clumsy, he had been angry and left the house many times. But at the sight of Mary's hurt and helpless face he had always come back. He had said that they ought to be married in spite of everything, and refused sometimes to see the obstacles.

But such outbreaks were rare now. Life seemed to be settling down. Only when Mary sometimes noticed his grey hair, and his aspect of forlornness, her heart would beat

painfully. Once, on a night in spring, he had stood at the foot of the steps looking up at her, and the moonlight through the clematis vine had erased the two deep wrinkles. His face was pale, at the same time old and young, with the ghost of his boyhood upon it. It had looked up at her with a mute unconscious pathos.

Mary could see his face all night. It had troubled her with old smothered memories, with dim hauntings of youth and age. If she could have been alone that night—if she could have wept! She turned to her mother with a consecration of devotion. But something seemed to die in her. After that, when her mother was bitter and exacting, she could not seem to turn to the thought of Henry and the future with such consolation as she had always done.

Her mother was growing frailer. She was dry and brittle, like a withered leaf. But she hung on. Year after year. People ceased expecting that she would die at any moment, as they had always done. It seemed that things would always be just as they were now.

But one night, very suddenly and when no one expected it, her mother died.

The word went quickly about Shell Spring: "Old Mrs. Lane is dead." People said: "So the old lady is gone! I began to think that she would last for ever. Poor Mary! Well, she's free at last."

4

Mary was dazed. Her care of her mother had been so absorbing that it had left her no room for the terror of death. It seemed impossible that her mother was gone. She could not realize that she was free. She kept up her old habits. She stayed on alone in the little house, cherishing the cosmos and the asters that lingered in her garden—it was late summer.

Henry came to see her just as he had always done. He still lived in the dingy room above the real-estate office and

cooked his solitary breakfasts. They went to church and prayer meeting. People said that they were waiting until "a decent time" had elapsed. But a year went by, and they were still going on in the old way.

"It's about time they were getting married, if they're ever going to," the women said knowingly.

The town began to laugh at them, instead of half contemptuously pitying them as it had always done. They became one of the standing jokes. What was the matter? Were they too poor? Henry must have something saved up by this time—he'd had time enough! They didn't expect to be any younger, did they? The other people at Mrs. Stonebarger's tried to tease Henry. But he seemed impervious. At church meetings, everywhere, there were sly allusions. People began to say that it was time somebody was waking them up.

John Nash was the one to do it. It was at prayer meeting, where they sat solemnly separated by a row of chairs. There was to be a Congregational convention at Oswego. John Nash, with a solemn face, proposed that "our good members Henry Acres and Miss Mary Lane" be elected as delegates. They were free from responsibilities, he said, that tied the other members at home. They were unanimously elected; and they went.

A number of inwardly delighted old women were at the windows to watch them leave for the two-ten train. It was years since Henry had gone out of town. He carried an ancient valise, caved in at the sides. But Mary had seen to it that his suit was brushed. And he wore a new straw hat.

There was a wedding party at the station. Jim Grove and the oldest Minkler girl. Everyone was gay, excited, shouting. The station-boy grinned when he trundled out the luggage with big white streamers fluttering from it. A shower of rice fell like little hailstones all over the platform when the bride and groom ducked, laughing, into the train.

Henry and Mary followed.

Someone—no one could decide who—threw a mischievous handful of rice at them. People shouted. The little white grains pelted them. They could hear the people on the platform clapping. They scurried into the car and sat down together in one of the red plush seats. Mary's little hands in white cotton gloves lay pathetically loose in her lap. A few grains of rice dribbled off the brim of Henry's hat. They could not look at each other.

But they were awake. A few weeks after that they were married, in the parsonage, with the minister's wife and daughter for witnesses, and no guests. Mary wore her old white dress with a sprig of syringa.

They lived together in the old Lane house. It seemed too bad—but it was the only sensible thing for them to do. Neither of them had any money to spare. The town laughed, was amazed, said: "At last, poor things!"—and got used to it. So did they, after a fashion.

5

Henry improved after his marriage. Everyone noticed it. Mary kept him brushed and dusted. He began to go briskly down the walk to the store. Even in church he refused to take all the thankless jobs. He said that he was doing enough. He had good food. Someone looked after his underwear. Suddenly he was a man. The travelling men who came to the store did not call him Henry. The children now growing up spoke of him as Mr. Acres. Old J. B. Boardman was getting feeble and beginning to depend upon him more and more. His salary was raised.

But Mary was frail. When the burden she had held so long was lifted, she could not seem to stand upright again. She could not get used to going about among the women as one of them. To herself she was not Mrs. Acres, but still Mary Lane. Even now she could not sleep at night from the old feeling that her mother was needing her. She could not go to things. She had got out of the habit, she said.

She could not seem to realize that the thing she had looked forward to for so long had happened.

After a while she knew that she was going to have a child. She tried to realize it. The presence of her mother was far more actual to her. This was a kind of phantom—but sometimes, as she went about the old house, her heart beat thrillingly. It seemed almost true. She wanted to believe in it—but she could not quite. It filled Henry with a deep content. But Mary thought of it wistfully, as of dreams that are too beautiful to really happen.

This feeling was a kind of prophecy. For she died when the child was born.

Henry would never get over it, people said. They felt the remorseful pity of those who see a joke turned suddenly to tragedy. They thought of the long years that these two had waited. Poor Henry. He had spent most of his life waiting. He had seemed so happy these last few months—and now this!

6

But he did get over it.

It was not very long until people began to speak of him and Mayme Francis, the milliner. A creature as different from Mary! And from Henry, too—but Henry had changed, they said, since his marriage. Even so, it was difficult to connect him with Mayme Francis. She had a large, rosy, well-tended face and a bosom that billowed under blouses of tinted georgette. When she walked she came tilting forward on Spanish heels that made her plump ankles bend. The old women discussed her and wondered what *she* could want of *him*. It was an insult to Mary's memory, they said. Although there was nothing really against the woman as far as anyone knew.

Henry's years of waiting, of hermitage up over the real-estate office, he now seemed to erase as easily as if they had never been. It was as if he had been storing up his youth

all these years and was only now letting it out. He was more than changed. He was transformed. He ushered only at the morning service at church and refused to have anything to do with Sunday School. Prayer meeting saw him no more. But it seemed strange, always, people said, to see him with someone else than Mary.

They sold the old house when they were married, and moved into the upstairs apartment of what had been the Farmers' Bank Building. Their furniture was new, shiny and flimsy. Mayme put up curtains of a bright-coloured thin cretonne with enormous bluebirds and flowers.

Old Boardman was quickly getting worse. He was hardly responsible any more. Henry practically ran the business. When the old man died, he would buy the store with some of Mayme's money. She still worked at her millinery trade. She was a good manager. She would make it pay.

The child was a little girl. Timid, silent, large-eyed from the start, frail. Bessie, the sister who had stayed at home, cared for her at first. The little girl was happy out on the farm. Her wan little cheeks grew faintly pink. Old ladies—friends of Mary and Mrs. Lane—who had wondered what the child would do, were satisfied about her now that Bessie had her, they said. She sat out in her little chair and cooed at the roosters and the waddling ducks in the farm-yard. Bessie adored her.

But Mayme said that it did not look well. No one was going to say that she was trying to get out of doing her duty. People in this town had said enough about her as it was. She "took" the little girl. She made her pretty dresses and always kept her clean and dainty. She "did everything for her," her friends said.

But when they came to see her, she pointed out to them the queer ways of the child. How unresponsive she was, and how she would creep away and seem to watch things and never say a word. Mayme hoped she wasn't secretive. She was no more like her father, Mayme said . . . Yes, sir, that was always the way. She always sidled off like that from

folks. Mayme liked up-and-coming youngsters, she said, like her sister Birdie's Ethelyn. Go to the lady, why don't you, Mollie? No, sir, that was the way she was. You see! Mayme sighed. She didn't know. . . .

It was easy enough to see whose daughter she was.

The Top of the Ladder



LBERT VOGEL was a good fellow, but quiet. He had never done much—just taken his father's place in the store, a general store in the country town of Burt, which he carried on with his uncle Will Vogel and his cousin Earl. Uncle Will still ran the business, treating Albert and Earl as clerks, sending them out to do the delivering with a wagon and a big umbrella labelled "Vogel Bros." and an old nag. He jollied Albert about all the unmarried women who came into the store, claiming that they had come to see him, and treated him like twenty instead of fifty.

Albert was still unmarried, one of the four real bachelors in Burt. He lived in the house his father had bought some thirty years before, a white house with a little steeple and a lightning-rod, with two huge evergreens growing before the front windows and filling the parlour and dining-room with a dim greenish gloom. His sister, a widow, Mrs. Cassie Marvin, kept house for him. She had one daughter, Cecil, a tall, bony, light-haired girl of nineteen whom she still thought of as a child.

People joked a good deal about Albert Vogel, teasing the young girls and the old girls about him whenever he was mentioned, and still saying that he was a nice, obliging fellow, after all. They would always rather have him wait on them in the store than Will, or that Earl. They felt sorry for him, said that he really deserved more than he had. They said that he had wanted to marry Jennie Bailey, and

then Olga Fitzsimmons, to whom he had sent two postal cards when he was away in Chicago, but somehow he never put himself forward enough. They said that Cassie made him toe the mark, and that Cecil was "no company at all." There was only a cat which Albert surreptitiously petted, and the flowers that Joe Ramsey had sent from his Michigan estate.

But they had no conception of what Joe Ramsey meant to Albert. They had all heard about Joe Ramsey, of course, and those who had been to the Vogel house had seen the views of the Michigan estate, the reproduction of Chloe Ramsey's portrait in an art magazine, Chloe's wedding picture, and the article on the Ramsey works in *Business Success*.

They all knew about Joe Ramsey, how he had worked for old Eli Vogel when he was a boy, and had slept in the back part of the store, how Albert had lent him eleven dollars to get to Chicago, and how he was now "worth his millions." Some of them could remember him as a dark, surly-looking boy who went about with Albert Vogel. They exclaimed when Albert told them about the Michigan estate, with the thirty-six servants and the eleven automobiles, and said: "Just think!"—but they had no notion of what it all meant to Albert. They had heard it all so often that they hardly listened when Albert said, proudly and yet wistfully:

"Yes, sir, Joe used to work right here in the store, and slept in the back part. Well, when he wanted to strike out for Chicago, I lent him all I had, eleven dollars I'd saved up to go to the State Fair. Didn't hear of him for I don't know how many years—then ten years ago he wrote to me asking me to visit him. And here he was, worth his millions, and living on that great Michigan estate! He has everything that heart could wish. Yes, sir, he's right on top of the ladder. But he's just as simple, just like anybody else—and all of them."

It made an impressive story for people in Burt to tell to strangers, however.

This evening, Mr. and Mrs. Livermore had dropped in to see Cassie and Albert. Although it was hot summer weather, they were all sitting in the stuffy parlour, for Mrs. Livermore decided that she could not stand the bugs and mosquitoes outside. Albert had been sitting amiably silent until somehow Cassie had managed to switch the talk from the split in the Baptist church to Joe Ramsey.

Cassie listened only with a non-committal, half-sarcastic air when Albert talked to her after a trip to the Ramseys—whom she called “your Ramseys,” and who, often as they invited Albert, had “never seen fit” to ask her or Cecil to come too. But Albert had noticed that she liked to bring them into the conversation when other people were there, and that if he forgot the thirty-six servants she was sure to mention them.

Albert got out from the lowest shelf of the bookcase the large manila folder in which he kept the pictures and magazines, and hitching up his chair toward Mrs. Livermore’s so that their knees almost touched, he reverently gave the pictures to her one by one and “explained about them.” She, in turn, passed them on to Mr. Livermore, saying: “Look, Dudley!” or “See, there’s the swimming-pool, Dudley.”

Albert carefully took out first the view of the estate as a whole. He pointed with his forefinger that was slender but a little roughened and grimed always from handling the goods:

“Now, this is the drive up to the estate. You see how it goes winding along between those trees—well, those are all beech-trees. Mr. Ramsey got the idea of a beech avenue from some big estate in England. Now, that road is all just as hard as a floor.”

“Fellow could have some good driving there,” Mr. Livermore put in jocularly.

“Now, this dark line you see along here leading up to the house—that’s a hedge of all kinds of wonderful flowering bushes, all kept just the same height and all blooming at different seasons of the year.”

"All kept the same height!" Mrs. Livermore exclaimed.

"Oh, yes, but then there's the gardeners to do it," Cassie put in. "How many is it he's got, Albert?"

"Oh, several," Albert said hastily.

He was eager to get on with his explanation. "Now, of course, this is the house, but I won't tell about that now, there's another view shows it better. Over here you see the little lake, here the gardens, and over here, this is a great wood of the natural Michigan timber that Mr. Ramsey left—but I'll tell you more about that later, too."

Mrs. Livermore looked, gathering up all the details that interested her, then passed it on to Mr. Livermore, saying: "Look, Dudley, over here's the gardens."

Mr. Livermore studied it vacantly, breathing heavily. He was an enormously fat man with three chins covered with short, damp, dark bristles. In the stuffy air of the parlour, moisture stood on his fat, creased forehead; and his thumb left a faint, moist pattern on the "view" which he tried surreptitiously to rub off against his trouser leg.

"Now, this shows the house!" Albert said triumphantly.

Mrs. Livermore was always interested in houses, since they were "thinking of building." She bent over to look.

"Well, I guess that's a bigger one than *we'll* build!" she cried.

"Well, I guess!" Cassie said with a short laugh. "How many rooms are there, Albert?"

It was a mansion of modified English design. Albert pointed out the sun parlour, the great hall, the servants' quarters, and "explained" how in the great hall there was a fire-place so big ten men could stand side by side in it, how the stairway was said to be the finest of any house in America, and how above it hung the portrait of Chloe that some great artist had painted and that he had a picture of in an art magazine.

"Chloe! She's the one that married some foreigner, ain't she?" Mrs. Livermore asked. "That her picture over the bookcase?"

Albert frowned a little, for he had not yet come to Chloe's wedding, and he liked to tell the whole thing methodically. He let Cassie begin the story of Chloe's wedding—how she had married an English lord and lived now in one of those great castles in England, about the twelve bridesmaids all in blue and silver, her colours, the little flower girls, minister in robes—

"But go on, Albert, you tell about it," she said impatiently. "You were there."

Albert tried to tell about the wedding, even if it was out of its proper place, and although it was impossible to make the Livermores understand how it really was. And he told about the English lord, Lord Broughton, who was "just as English as you make 'em but as nice and simple as if he was anybody." He told how, when he had come to the wedding, Chloe and Lord Broughton had driven to the station to meet him, and how Lord Broughton had talked, just as nice and friendly as anyone.

"Yes, well, lots of these rich girls marry foreigners, you know," Mrs. Livermore said wisely. "It's the title they're after. And lots of 'em are awful unhappy. What was that book that came out a while ago?"

Albert tried eagerly to explain that Chloe and Lord Broughton were not at all like that, but it was useless. To them, Lord Broughton was an "English lord," a kind of curiosity, scarcely a real person at all. Albert could not seem to make them feel the wonder of his having moved on equal terms with such a man as that, who knew everything and had been everywhere. During that drive, he had sat between one of the greatest beauties in America and an English nobleman! It was like a story. And Joe Ramsey had made it come true. He was almost reluctant to get down Chloe's wedding photograph and show it to Mrs. Livermore, although he was pleased when she exclaimed over it:

"Say! Well, she is pretty, all right enough. Look at that veil, would you?"

"How much do you suppose that cost?" Cassie demanded.

"Well, I guess so. Look here, Dudley."

"Who's that?"

"Why, that girl Albert's been telling about that married the foreigner."

"Oh!"

Albert took the photograph delicately from Mr. Livermore's moist, indifferent grasp and gave a lingering look at it as he replaced it on the bookcase. He knew so perfectly the lovely drooping form, the bent head under the flowing veil, the hair like a thick dark cloud, shadowy and vague; and he could see the pure white skin and the blue eyes set deep, in black lashes.

"This picture came out in some magazine," he said. "But I never could get hold of a copy."

"Well, you've got the real thing," Mrs. Livermore said.

"Yes. Well—" he took out the next view—"now these are the gardens."

He tried to "explain" about them, about the sunken pool edged with white narcissi, and the little tea house that was modelled after an old English inn, where Mrs. Ramsey had once entertained a great explorer when Albert was there; the rose garden that it took one gardener all his time to look after, and from which that bush of pink roses in the yard had come.

"Oh, those roses you gave the ladies to decorate the tables with at the Alumni banquet?" Mrs. Livermore broke in.

"Yes, those. I admired them so, when I was there once," Albert said modestly, "and just a few days after I got home, Mrs. Ramsey sent me a bush. But that's the way they all are. Just as generous as that."

"They ask you there real often, don't they?" Mrs. Livermore said curiously.

"Yes," said Albert. His voice trembled slightly. "That's the way with Joe Ramsey. He never forgets a friend. Once he worked in our grocery store—now he's one of the richest

men in America, almost. He's got everything that heart could wish for. But he never forgets."

"Funny he asks just you and nobody else here," Mrs. Livermore mused. "But then, you were good friends, weren't you? And of course you lent him the money to go away."

Albert modestly said nothing.

He could see that Mrs. Livermore was getting fidgety, although he had not yet come to the end of the views, and had not shown the article in *Business Success*.

In the intervals of his explanation she began talking to Cassie—"Had you heard that Leone Badger had gone back to her husband? Yes, they're going to try to get along with each other again"—while she rocked, holding the photograph in her hand. Mr. Livermore was quite dumb. He took the photograph when it was handed to him, stared at it agonizingly, and held it, breathing hard. Soon the views were forgotten altogether.

"Yes; well, I think it's right that they should," Mrs. Livermore was saying comfortably. "I tell you I don't believe in all these divorces. Look at Nan Clark, and her husband—"

"Albert, you don't want to let any of these grass widows get hold of you," Mr. Livermore said with heavy jocularity.

Albert tried to smile. They had not understood all the wonder of the Ramseys—all they would remember were the thirty-six servants, the eleven automobiles, the English lord, and that the bushes were kept the same height. These were not the things that really mattered, although he collected all such details with artless admiration and repeated them as evidence of Joe Ramsey's success. The real wonder was that success—that Joe Ramsey, who had worked for Vogel Bros. and gone barefoot with Albert Vogel, had risen as high as they once had dreamed when, two boys, they lay out under the big oak-tree by the spring in Riegel's pasture and said what they would do some day. It was not only that Joe was

not proud and had not forgotten. He *was* proud. He had forgotten all the rest of Burt. Albert Vogel alone was still chosen as the friend of Joe Ramsey.

This sustained him. This made him feel, in spite of his loneliness, a shy wondering pride in himself. It made him think that it was something different, something a little choice in him, which had set him apart from the rest of Burt, had kept him solitary.

No one in Burt understood. They even made fun of Albert's pride in Joe Ramsey, wondered if he was quite as much as Albert made him out to be. But this, while it made him still lonelier, fed his pride. How could they understand, knowing nothing of such a life as the Ramseys lived, the beauty of the days as they passed on the Michigan estate, the exquisiteness of the details of life, the wonderful people who came, the talk?

It was like a fairy-tale. The Livermores could not even imagine such things. He had shared it. There was a room in that great house called "Albert's room"—an exquisite room where he felt more at home than in his own bedroom upstairs that faced the upper branches of the evergreen. There was one great deep chair in that wonderful living-room that Chloe playfully called his, where she insisted on leading him whenever he came. Sitting there, in the afternoon silence, how often he had heard a hidden clock strike the hour and chime a little golden tune. There was his own place at the long sombre table in the dining-room; and in the gay-coloured breakfast-room where he often had Chloe to pour his coffee in the morning.

They treated him, all of them, even Rupert who was a wild lad, always off somewhere or other, with a kind of beautiful affectionate ownership, as set apart in a special friendship from all the rest of the world. No wonder that he "fussed with his nails," as Cassie said; that he would not let Cecil buy cheap records for the phonograph; that he would not go about the store, as Uncle Will did, in an old vest and shirt-sleeves. He belonged to the Ramseys.

While Cassie and the Livermores talked, he gathered up the views and put them carefully back in the manila folder. The lake, the wood—he loved them all as if they had been his own. In fact, he often said that he took more pride and pleasure in them than Joe himself. He had had tea in that tea house—had drunk it out of an old English cup. He had sat among the birches in the woods and read a book written by a man with whom he had talked the night before. He had talked with a real author. He put the things away reverently.

When the Livermores left, he went hospitably out on to the porch with Cassie and stood there while Mr. Livermore, with terrible puffings, and with advice from Mrs. Livermore, cranked his Ford.

"You better come in," Cassie said to him then, "or you'll be howling about your rheumatism again to-morrow. My! Seems to me there's an awful dew."

"Oh, I'll sit here a few minutes. So hot in there," he said.

2

He sat down in the porch swing of green-painted slats swung on creaking iron chains until he heard Cassie at work with the bread in the kitchen. Then he went softly out to the east yard, where he kept his flowers. He did not want Cassie to hear him.

They stood motionless in the hot, damp night, pale-coloured and tall. All of them had come from the Ramsey gardens—Canterbury bells of frosty blue and lavender, larkspur, beautiful pinks, an azalea, a Japanese hydrangea, flame-tinted dahlias.

Touching them, catching their faint midsummer scent, he could vision the great gardens. He could remember wonderful solitary morning hours in them, such happiness as he had not dreamed of having since he was a boy; and afternoons when he had sat, pleased and listening, with others in

the tea house, introduced to them as "Mr. Ramsey's oldest friend"; one night that he had never told a soul about, when Chloe had laughingly taken him by the hand and led him out to show him the sunken pool by moonlight. He had felt the delicate touch of Chloe's hand—in blue, with silver in her hair—like the most beautiful romantic dream he had ever dared to dream. He remembered the pool with the motionless white narcissi all about the dark water—think of it!

Why, the whole thing was a miracle. It kept alive his faith in the wonder of life. Joe had scaled the heights. He was on top of the ladder. To think his own eleven dollars had helped to create all this marvellous beauty! He often said to Joe: "Joe, what do you want of me? You've got everything—what do you want of me?" Yet he did. Joe wanted him. There was something special that he could do for Joe, something to pay for all the beauty Joe gave him. Joe—with riches, a beautiful home, a handsome wife, a brilliant son, Chloe, everything!

Joe made light of his success. He pretended that it was nothing. Just because he had everything on earth, Albert said, he had to grumble at himself for having it. He said the business ran itself and was no fun any more. He said that he hardly got a chance to know his wife and children. That the good days were the days when he had set out for Chicago on Albert's eleven dollars, with everything before him. That was just Joe's old surly, dissatisfied way.

Albert would laugh fondly at him, and praise him and his possessions with naïve, trustful wonder. Of course he was satisfied—if ever anyone had everything on earth to make him so! He always laughed and talked Joe out of it. Joe's life was perfect, as nearly as anything on this earth could be.

Albert wondered when he would go to the estate this year. He had put off buying a summer suit until he knew. He meant to go, even if Uncle Will did make a fuss and talk about some people always having vacations. Oh, what these visits meant to him! He lived on them all year. On these hot nights he longed for the coolness of his room there that

opened out upon a high secluded porch. He was afraid that Joe was lonely since Chloe was gone. Rupert was away again, too—had gone off to the South Seas in a cruising vessel. Mrs. Ramsey always said that he could talk Joe into a better humour than anyone else. He had a feeling that he ought to be there. He looked on them all as his own. He had transferred all his own hopes of happiness, all his pride, to them, where it was certain and secure.

He had had a dim notion of hearing a bicycle on the walk; and now Cassie called out to him in an excited voice:

“Albert! Telegram for you!”

“Is it from Michigan?” Albert asked.

“Well, open it!” Cassie cried impatiently.

But Albert was slow. He had to look it all over first, while the depot boy stood leaning against the porch.

Cassie afterward declared with morbid relish to everyone who stopped her on the street or came in to talk about it: “Albert honestly got just as white as those curtains. I thought he was going to faint dead away.”

He was white, a sick white, with blue lips.

Cassie demanded:

“What is it?”

He could not answer, but gave her the telegram and went dazedly upstairs.

“What is it, mamma?” Cecil begged fretfully.

“Why,” Cassie said, her face blank with amazement, “Joe Ramsey’s shot himself.”

Cassie hurried upstairs after Albert. As she said afterward, she did not dare to leave him alone. She stood in the doorway of his room while he slowly and tremulously got his white shirts out of the drawer. She did not dare to bombard him with questions as she would usually have done.

“Are you going?” she asked.

He did not answer, but she could see that he was packing his bag.

“There’s still some of that brandy downstairs. You better let me get you a glass.”

"What do I want with brandy?"

"Albert, you don't know how you look. You'll be fainting away first thing you know."

He went on packing. Cassie had never seen him like this. It excited her. When she could stand it no longer, she asked:

"What do you suppose it was? Do you suppose he lost his money?"

"No," Albert said fiercely. "How could he lose his money?"

"Well, but it must have been something. Didn't him and his wife get along together?"

He disdained to answer this. As if the Ramseys were just like people in Burt!

But his self-control soon melted under the force of the blow. By the time he came downstairs he was trembling, and said to Cassie, with a frightened look in his eyes:

"It must have been an accident. What else could it have been? He had everything on earth. There wasn't a thing—"

He kept brooding over it, dazed and unbelieving, until he left for the train. It was the four-ten that steamed away into a red-glowing East while the thick early dew was still on the sweet clover along the tracks. This was the journey he had always made with such anticipation. Now he sat with all thought suspended until he should know why—why . . .

3

A week later Albert came back. Cassie was sewing in the dining-room when she heard him bang the screen door and set down his bag heavily. She motioned with her lips to Cecil: "Uncle Albert's got home," and got up.

"Albert!" she called.

"Yes."

"That you?"

Albert had sat down in a rocking-chair without taking off his hat. His face was perspiring and pale. He raised his eyes. The shy, gentle, trusting look had gone out of them. They were full of a great desolation, of defeat and failure rather than grief.

Cassie said eagerly, but a little fearfully:

“Well . . . what did you find out?”

“Well . . .” Albert said heavily, “he shot himself, all right.”

“Was it an accident?” Cassie demanded, yet knowing the answer.

“No.”

His hands lay limp on the chair arms, moist and grimed with cinders from the journey.

Cassie noticed them as she asked:

“Was it he’d lost his money?”

“No.”

“Hadn’t! Why, what then? What’d happened?”

Albert made a gesture. “Nothing.”

“Nothing! He didn’t shoot himself for nothing! What do you mean?”

“Nobody knows.” Albert moved his lips as if he had strength to state nothing but the bare facts. “He just went into the bathroom and blew out his brains. He left a note saying life wasn’t worth a damn.”

Cassie sat aghast. The words sounded strange on Albert’s gentle lips, strange in the clean, quiet, small-town parlour, in the thick summer air.

Cassie was too dumbfounded to say a word. She gazed at Albert, seeing that he looked as if all the life had gone out of him.

“I’m going up. I’m tired,” he said heavily.

She wanted to ask about the funeral, and whether Chloe and her husband had come, but she could not then. She only sat there listening to him climb the stairs, with hollow, lifeless steps and close the door of his stuffy little bedroom.

Mame

I



AME BUSSEY was the only one of the Mosher family left in Karnak. "Karnak!" people said, when they looked out of the windows of the one train that stopped. Such a name for such a place! All you could see from the station were the depot, a straggling, rutted road, a few wooden stores, a brick bank with a Ford outside, and some elderly frame houses with evergreen trees.

No hope of much doing in the business line there. The only ones who had any money were the banker and the retired farmers, and of course they never let go of a cent.

The Mosher boys, who were hustlers, had one by one got away, most of them to Grundy City, the county seat, known as Grundy. They had all done well. H. H. had a "department store" there, an amazing conglomerate place that sold everything from pants buttons to farm implements and had even a "furniture addition" built out over the river and reached by an outside wooden stairway. But farmers liked to buy there. H. H. had the trade. "Mosher's Has Got It," asserted the wooden signs planted in front of all the handsome trees along the Lincoln Highway.

Louie had a little ice-cream factory to which he was adding an ice-cream parlour and up-to-date confectionery.

Bert, the youngest, was in real estate, and during the land boom was reported to have "made money hand over fist." He wanted to get into politics now; meant to run for State Representative. It was because of May, his wife. She was

getting too good for Grundy and was wild to get to Des Moines, the other relatives said.

Of the others, Flo had married a dentist in Waring, Wade had moved to Kansas (he had lately died), and George was farming four hundred acres nine miles out of Karnak. He was supposed to "kind of keep an eye on Mame." Mame still lived in Karnak, on the old place.

It was Louie, however, who had lately heard from Mame. His heart had sunk a little when he had noticed the letter beside his plate at noon. Grace had had her eye on him while he read it—one of Mame's usual hasty scrawls written with a stub pencil on a piece of scratch paper and stuck into a yellow stamped envelope.

"What's the matter this time?" Grace demanded.

Of course she had seen that the letter was from Karnak and from Mame.

"I don't know that anything is," Louie answered. "Wants me to come over to Karnak some time and see her."

He thrust the letter into his vest pocket.

"Well, aren't you going to let me see it?"

"Nothing to see. Just what I said."

He did not want Grace to know that he had discerned Mame's usual frantic haste in the scrawl, which was only a few words trailing down the page:

DEAR LOUIE, wish you could come over to Karnak would like to have a talk with you. Come tomorrow if you can if not first day soon. Alick had a fall last week and has been pretty lame since. well will expect you soon.

Your loving sister

MAME.

Louie did not even speak of Alick's fall. The subject of Mame and Alick was a tender one in this house.

Grace had her suspicions.

"Say how Pearl is?" she demanded.

"No," Louie answered truthfully.

He had once given Mame the fifty dollars to pay for

a tonsil operation for Pearl. Grace remembered it.

"Well, you're not going to take anything more out of your pocket to keep them going, I'll just tell you that! You can let Bert do it awhile. Let him spend a little on his sister instead of buying new sedans."

Louie said in a low voice: "Pass pepper, Edgar," and did not look up. But Grace's voice and the hard closed-up look on her plump black-eyed face hurt. He had a soft spot for poor old Mame.

2

As a kind of conciliation to Grace—and partly to put off some uncomfortable moments for himself—he did not go to Karnak until the next Thursday, his slack day. Then he called up the house when he was pretty sure that Grace would not be there, and told Lorna to "tell mamma papa wouldn't be back until evening." He took the Ford and drove to Karnak.

He stopped on the way at George's for dinner.

George had a big farm-house which he had just had "pebbled-dashed" and a new porch added. Boards and buckets still stood about with little mounds and sprinkles of pebble-dash. They saw him coming. Maxine, the youngest girl, came out of the house and then rushed back in, and he heard her shouting: "It's Uncle Louie, mamma! Mamma! It's Uncle Louie!"

Gustie, George's wife, came to the door and said somewhat shyly:

"Hello, Louie. Better stop and have some dinner."

He stopped to look around. "Well, you have got things fixed up!"

"Yes. How do you like it?"

"First-rate. Makes a great improvement."

"I didn't think I was going to like it at first," Gustie said, "but it isn't so bad now it's done."

"Why didn't you like it?"

"Oh—I liked the old place the way it was."

Louie followed Gustie into the house, wondering a little about her as the other relatives always did. She was a silent woman, with a touch of reserve, almost of melancholy, lurking somewhere in the stolidity of her heavy Dutch-looking face. She was Dutch, too, in the spotlessness of her house, the excellence of her cooking, the cleanliness of her house dresses, so fresh and starched that they achieved a kind of distinction.

The other wives could never quite make her out. They wondered if she wasn't stupid. Still, she seemed to make George happy; they had to admit that. Her own family seemed to care for her. And she was a welcome addition to the picnics and dinners of "the relationship" because of the good things to eat that she always contributed. It was with a memory of this that Louie had stopped at George's, as well as to "kind of talk things over a little with George before he went on."

He sat in the clean, somewhat bare parlour through which a little country wind blew, and smelled the cooking. Maxine had been sent out to the field to "tell papa Uncle Louie's here." George came tramping in.

"Hello, Louie! Wee gates! What you doing around here—peddling ice cream?"

"No, just stopped in to see all these new fixings you're putting on."

"Hey? Pretty fine? Come out and have a look."

Louie followed George out. He would not mention Mame until after dinner, but he could see that George knew that he had something to talk over.

The two brothers stood together on the hot lawn that seemed hotter with the glare of sunlight on the troughs of mortar and the new pebble-dash that gave off blinding flashes. They were both Moshers, but Louie was smaller in every way than George, and paler, with a scraggly little moustache that was turning grey. George was proud of his house. Louie admired—he really was pleased to see what

George had made of the place, to imagine pointing it out and saying: "Yes, that's my brother's place. Farms four hundred acres."

Gustie came and stood beside them and murmured in a low voice:

"Come on in now, George."

He caught at her heavy arm.

"Hey, Louie, what do you think of this girl of mine not wanting to have her house fixed up in style when she had the chance? But I guess she can stand it now it's done—eh, mamma?"

She gave her slight smile with its faint suggestion of melancholy. "Come in now, George. It'll get cold."

George cried heartily:

"Come in, Louie. *Setzen Sie.* Now, make out a meal."

"Well, this is something like!" Louie cried.

Pork, steamed potatoes, fine brown gravy, Gustie's fresh biscuits with new clover honey just off the hive. Gustie knew how to set out a meal! She had put on the gold-rimmed dishes and a clean white cloth even if it was "for just Uncle Louis." She pressed things upon him in her silent, shy, inscrutable way.

He was glad that Grace was not here to cast warning looks upon him whenever he took another biscuit. He liked to be at George's. There was something prosperous and hearty about the household. That same fresh little breeze blew through the big, bare dining-room. Besides, George and Louie, as being nearer of an age and less wealthy than Bert and H. H., were joined in a kind of sympathy, a feeling that the others were "upnish." Now the foreboding about Mame that had been nagging at Louie all week seemed less.

After dinner he went out on to the new porch with George. George was taking it easy now—leaving the hard work to young Willard.

"Heard from Mame lately?" he asked then.

"No," George said. "You?"

Louie handed over the letter. George read it, frowning and saying:

"Hmp! Well, now what—know what's up, Louie?"

"No more than what's there."

"Hmp! Well, sir, those folks are always in trouble." George seemed to draw consolation from a kind of humorous appreciation of this fact. He stared out at the road, shook his head. "I'm afraid we'll have them on our hands yet some day."

Louie was too generally mild to like to say this as baldly as George. But it was what they all feared secretly of Mame and Alick.

"That Pearl's a queer one," George said. "You can hardly drive Maxine here to go and see her. Know Alick lost that janitor's job?" he added abruptly. "Yes, they let him go since they've put up that big consolidated school at Karnak. Well, I don't blame them. It's awful hard on the poor things, but then Alick's in no shape to look after a big building like that. Yeh, Alick's in pretty bad shape. Getting awful blind, poor old fellow. Yep, blind as a bat. Besides that crippled foot. Had a fall—"

"So Mame wrote."

Louie was shaken. He had supposed that as far as living expenses went, the brothers had "got them fixed up for a while" when they had secured Alick the janitor's job. What he had really been fearing was that one of them was sick again. He felt now that what Grace was always saying was true—it was no use helping them; there would always be something; they were bound to be unfortunate. George seemed to recognize this in a tolerant, half-humorous way. Louie would have liked to sneak out of it, and go back, but some vision of Mame's stricken, appealing eyes would not let him.

He got little satisfaction out of George more than "gathering" that he had had a lot of expense lately fixing up the place and that he thought it was Flo's and Warren's

turn to do something. He was going to send Mame a pig when he butchered, and that ought to help her through the winter.

"Funny thing," he said meditatively, putting his feet up on the new porch railing, "how those folks seem to let everything fall through their hands. Now, they ought to have made something of that place of pa's, you'd think. Just seems as if they're bound to be unfortunate. And they're not so slow—Mame's a smart enough woman in her way, always was. Even old Alick—but I don't know! And good folks—I always liked old Mame a darn sight better'n Flo, to tell the honest truth about it. She's awful good-hearted—almost too good-hearted. Don't know which side her bread's buttered on. Well—tell me what you find out."

3

Louie drove away feeling slightly disgruntled. It seemed to him that George might easily do more—he was sliding out of it very neatly! He had that big farm. And all the children were grown now except Maxine. If he could build fine new porches—Louie got warm under his collar. He supposed the others were saying the same thing of him. If he could enlarge his business and talk about buying a new Buick!—He supposed that it might look as if he were prospering. But they did not know how many calls he had, with Lorna going to the State Normal and Edgar ready to start into business. He couldn't be expected to support the whole relationship.

But poor old Mame! If it wasn't for Grace . . . But he simply couldn't stand Grace's fussing. A funny thing how Grace had always had it in for poor Mame. Grace was a good woman; she would do anything for her own folks. But when it came to his doing anything for Mame—! She never would forget how he had paid for having Pearl's tonsils cut out. And she always had a good argument:

"Why don't some of the rest do something for a change?"

Look at Bert! Look at H. H.! Look at even George with that big farm! Seems to me Wade might have left her something instead of leaving it all to Lena. They've got three times as much as you have, any of them."

That was true. It was as if Grace sensed and was jealous of the little bit of special feeling he had always had for Mame. She didn't like to have him go there. And there was always a sneaking gnawing remembrance in his heart of how Mame had once, years ago, given him every cent of the small wages she had made working for Dan Peterman at the hotel so that he could tell Old Man Waters he had fifty dollars in the bank and so be permitted to marry Grace!—Of course he had done quite a lot for Mame. . . .

He drove into Karnak.

It was the same old place. When people got money they moved into Grundy. It made him think of the old days, the old folks, Mame—these were all associated. The same old dirt road dipping toward town and then rising a little in the distance. How often he had scuffed along it with bare feet, taking berries to the hotel to sell and perhaps earn a quarter! Old Lingenfeld's place on the left, with the huge evergreen growing right in front of the door. All these houses, growing elderly now like the generation that had built them—with narrow porches, wooden scrollwork, ells, gardens, pumps, tall evergreen trees, grapes along the fences . . . Going away, even so far as to Grundy, he and the other boys had left all this behind, way behind.

He drove up to the old place.

Every time he felt a slight shock to see how small it was, how shabby and unkempt and closed-in, dark and mouldering almost under the trees—the sight and smell of it brought everything back. It made him think of the old folks in their last days, and now of Mame.

The house was painted a dingy, faded, darkened, hideous yellow, with a faint reminder of green on the border of shingles around it. Tall trees stood about it, bending their upper branches and rustling in the hot, dreary summer wind

that was blowing. There was a fence of wire in loops at the top, rusted, bent down in one place as if something had trampled and run over it. The pump on the sloping platform back of the house, and a wooden washtub broken at the rim, an old broom, ancient bee ware boxes, broken flower pots, a mop with a stiff greyish cloth leaning against the wall. Old sheds, the empty barn, the outhouse absurdly trimmed like the house—under the fruit-trees an old decayed beehive, reminder of the days when Mame and Alick had “tried bees”; but Karnak was too small and they had had no means of getting the honey into Grundy; before they could do it, it had grown old and the ants got into it . . . a kitchen chair with no back out under the trees. . . .

Alick was sitting out in that old camp chair Mame used to take when they all went camping years ago.

When he heard the car stop he bent forward and peered at it, then slowly got up. He shuffled forward a little way, with his uncertain sight and his crippled foot.

“Hello, Alick!” Louie called out.

“Hello?” he answered doubtfully.

Alick had been several years older than Mame when she married him. But now Louie was startled to see how the poor fellow had aged the last year. An old man now! He wore an ancient pair of trousers and a shirt open at the neck. He had let his beard grow a little. It was quite grey, and his hair hung in long grey wisps. His eyes were filmed and uncertain, his face sunken in mournful, hopeless lines. He looked like those old hicks that used to hang around the Karnak hotel and depot—like old Uncle Jake Dyer!

“It’s Louie,” Louie called out with false cheer. His eyes slid away from the painful sight. He would not admit it to his sympathies—must not, could not.

“Oh—Louie, is it?”

“Mame here?”

“She’s somewhere—I’ll call her——”

Louie, in a kind of panic, was glad to have him go. He could not sympathize with him. How lame he was! Could

hardly seem to get to the house. If he had been a stranger, Louie would have sprung to help him; but being Alick, one of the family, one to whom he was used and whom his prudence would not let him pity, he let him go.

And yet it hurt him to see what Alick had come to. He had always liked Alick. He remembered when Alick was first courting Mame, how he used to bring to Louie and George and Bert, the little brothers, chocolate drops in striped paper sacks. A good, harmless fellow. He remembered how, when the horse had dragged Alick, crippling him for life, and people had said she "would have to give him up now," Mame had wept and declared she "didn't care, she'd said she was going to marry him and she was going to do it just the same, if she did have to take care of him all her days." Well, she had— And yet the poor girl had managed to lend Louie her twenty dollars so that he could marry Grace! Not one of them would have done such a thing but Mame.

He heard steps in the house, turned and saw Mame at the door hastily tying on a fresh apron.

She came out on to the porch with its sloping narrow floor, with the old chair that one of the boys had made out of willow branches when they were all out camping, and which had stood there ever since, since time immemorial—!

Louie greeted her affectionately. He said nothing about the letter and neither did she. They both acted as if he were making a casual brotherly call. They talked about Grace, Lorna, Pearl, Bert and his wife. But he could see a strained, inattentive look on Mame's face.

Alick had sat down in the willow chair with its checked, faded gingham cushion. He was regarding them with an old man's peering suspicion. "Getting childish," Louie thought. Once he said with a kind of pathetic pride: "I'm awful blind now. See how blind I am?"

It was his only claim now for attention and sympathy. Louie turned it off with a false hearty cheer.

"You look kind o' thin, Louie," Mamie said with concern.

The Moshers did not quarrel as some "relationships" did, and yet it was really only Mame who kept this genuine older sister's affection for her brothers. She had always looked after them. She was older than all of them except Wade. Imagine Flo saying it in just that way! She would have cried, with that faint glimmer of curiosity: "Aren't you thin, Louie? What have they been doing to you?"—wondering if his business wasn't going well, or if Grace wasn't looking after him. Even Grace would have said it accusingly, somehow.

Mame herself did not look very different than she had for years, for she had always had to work too hard and had never had a chance to take care of herself. She was a loosely built woman with straggling hair that had once been red, a corded neck and a kindly, sunken, helpless face. She had lost some more teeth, that was all. Now she had only a few stumps left.

After a time she said, with a vague note of warning in her voice:

"Come into the house, Louie, and see how the old place looks."

Louie was going to protest that it was too hot, when she gave a meaning look at Alick.

"Oh, all right, guess I will," he then said hastily.

Alick peered after them with bitter and yet pathetic suspicion.

"I don't want him to hear," Mame whispered. "He can't do anything about it, and it just sets him going."

That old front room—was it possible that it still existed, just like that, was not a dream of his boyhood? That ancient organ, the ingrain carpet, those old, old chairs, the scroll-back horsehair lounge, the "God Bless Our Home" executed by Flo in "spatterwork"—? That same old musty house smell that he associated with the place and all that had ever happened there. Plants on stands and in brackets by the front window. . . .

Mame looked cautiously out. Alick had gone hobbling

back to the camp chair on the lawn. There was no use in counting on Alick any more. He was out of it—poor old fellow.

Louie sat down on the lounge with the horsehair that was turning brownish-grey and breaking along the edges. The place was exactly as it had been when the old folks were living, except that every year it was getting more run down. Mame had never had means to change it or fix it up. The only new thing was an enlarged portrait, in a gold frame that curled over at the top, of Pearl at five, with stringy curls; and a red and yellow pennant labelled "Karnak H. S." fastened up above the organ.

This room always made Louie feel guilty. It brought back so much. Say what they might, it had been a hard thing for Mame to leave her here with the old folks, with pa getting as queer as he had, and ma so much care. Eleven years she had had of it! Of course it had meant that she and Alick got their living during those years, and yet Louie could not help a sneaking feeling that it had left them worse off in the end. And the brothers had left them the house. That was supposed to "keep them" the rest of their days. H. H. declared that it should have done so—and yet of what actual value was this old gone-to-seed property in a town like Karnak? And suppose they should sell it for some trifling sum—what would they do and where would they go then? It sounded fine—to "leave them the home." Flo was always talking about it. And yet it had been pretty hard on Mame. Louie and George sometimes agreed on that. Would any of the rest have been willing to stay here for such compensation? Would any of the others have done it at all?

Louie felt a remorseful affection for her, tempered with many other things—with the fear of Grace, the need for caution, the sneaking feeling that he could not do anything for her again, the pleasing superior sense of his own comparative prosperity that made it so easy for him to dictate, a shudder at the feeling of the old place, an irritation at Mame's and Alick's general helplessness.

Mame would have begun her story, but Louie, with a sudden sense of panic, forestalled her as long as he could.

"Alick's sight's pretty bad, hm?" he said.

"Oh, he can't see nothing hardly, Louie. And he's so lame. You know they took his janitor's job away from him?" she asked fearfully. "The boys" had got him that job. "I think it was that Joe Kenney. He wanted it for his wife's cousin, that Overholzer."

"Yes, George told me. Too bad."

"Oh, d'you see George?" Mame asked with a flicker of interest.

"Stopped there as I came by, to see the new porch." He did not say "for dinner" for fear that Mame would understand that he had not wanted to eat here.

Mame was sitting in that old rocker that was still loose on the standard and came forward with a jerk that rasped Louie's nerves. Did these people ever fix anything when it was coming to pieces? And yet, where were they to begin? Mame's hands grasped the two chair arms upholstered in faded green-flowered velvet with dangling fringe. Her face had a strained, frightened look.

"Oh, Louie," she said suddenly, "I'm afraid we're going to lose the place."

She began to cry, sniffing weakly and as if she did not expect anyone to comfort her.

Louie sat perfectly still. This was something new—and yet he might have expected it.

"They're going to put paving past," Mame went on in a voice that was shaken, desperate and yet helpless. "The township voted it."

"Why, but—" Louie said unbelievingly—"that can't be. We haven't heard anything about it in Grundy."

"It ain't from Grundy. It's going through the other way. Going to begin at Cass Lake and go on through to Lowton. They're trying to make Cass Lake a resort."

"Hm! I did hear something of that. But—"

"It'll be through here next summer," Mame sobbed.

"Well, but that'll be fine, Mame! That'll put the old place on the map. Maybe Karnak'll grow after all!"

"Yes, Louie, but it's the taxes. I don't see how we can pay a cent more. We just can't. Alick losing that job——" Her voice trailed off.

4

Louie sat, not knowing what to say. The desolate hot wind blew through the house and set a door idly slamming back and forth somewhere. All their doors were loose or did not catch.

In an instant Louie had caught terrifying implications—had seen what it might mean if Mame and Alick had to leave. Was she hoping that "the boys" would help with the taxes? He doubted it. They would realize that the old place was not worth it; that it would be almost valueless after Mame and Alick died. Was she hoping to come to them? He stiffened, inwardly opposing all these things and yet wanting to appear sympathetic. He felt something of that irritation that the others were always feeling, and expressing, toward Mame, that hers and Alick's helplessness invited.

"Oh, Louie," she moaned, "what are we going to do?"

Her hand trembled toward him. He grasped it, patted it, feeling like a hypocrite. The sight of her bowed old head hurt him. He would have liked to—and yet he must not. All his family claims arose accusingly before him. The knowledge that he was not going to do anything for her made him awkward and stiff.

"Well, Mame, we'll have to see. Don't worry now. Don't cry. Have you spoken to anyone else? H. H.—or Bert?"

She shook her head and raised her drenched, faded eyes. "It's so hard to tell them anything—I'd rather tell you, Louie, and have you tell them."

Louie's heart sank. But he knew what she meant, and what he felt as his "better self" rose. She had always cared

most for him. Almost secret, unexpressed, the bond was closer between them. He had been the sickly one of the brothers. Mame had taken care of him. He could remember when Mame had been the rock and centre of his world. Still, he stood up for her, a little sheepishly, when the others discoursed upon her shiftlessness, saying: "Well, old Mame had had a pretty hard time of it." He did not let out his exasperation upon her so baldly and openly.

Mame kept on sobbing, trying to speak between gulps, humbly, and yet with a faint pride she never lost.

"I don't want to ask you boys to do anything else for us. I've had to come to you so much, seems like. Oh, Louie, you don't know how I dread being a burden on somebody! I know if we'd managed better—but somehow we've always had terrible luck. Oh, Louie"—she clutched at his hands—"what can we do? We can't be turned out into the street!"

"There, there now, Mame. There now," he mauldered helplessly, realizing what were her fears.

She reached tremulously for a handkerchief, found none, wiped her eyes and blew her nose on the hem of her apron, settled back and grew suddenly so composed that it startled Louie, still in the act of consolation.

"Alick can't do a thing any more; it's no use looking to him for anything," she stated calmly. "Alick's an old man now. He's got to be looked after. Well, I've always had to look after Alick a good deal. He's always meant well—and I guess if that horse hadn't dragged him—— But Alick ain't even as much of a manager as I am. But it's Pearl!"

She grew suddenly panic-stricken again. "Oh, Louie, I can't have Pearl turned out! I can't have her way off from me somewhere meetin' the hardships of life all alone. And she's so young and ain't a bit strong——"

Now Louie was terrified. He sat perfectly still again, not moving a muscle. Was she going to ask him to look after Pearl? Already he had seen that he could not refuse her, and his mind was ranging over the question of means, of persuading Grace—— Pearl was the stumbling-block.

He could not help feeling a great deal like the others—why had Mame and Alick needed to have Pearl when they had never had enough for their own two selves! Here, when everyone had thought that Mame was through with all that for ever, if she hadn't had to go and have Pearl—so Grace and Minnie, H. H.'s wife, always said. If Pearl herself had not been such a mortally unattractive child—colourless, anaemic, light-haired, whining, childish and unaccountable, the child of her parents' age and poverty. Not one of "the relationship" but had a secret fear of being saddled with the care of Pearl some day. But she was the light of Mame's eye, even though Mame saw and mourned over her faults. Mame had had bad luck with her children, as with everything else, losing three of them, one after the other, before they were a year old. No wonder she thought so much of Pearl. The relatives could not blame her. They could take it out only in discussing the deficiencies of Pearl.

But if Mame had been going to ask anything, she sensed his silence and did not.

"It ain't myself I'm scared about," she said. "I could get along some way. It's them to look after."

She clutched the chair arms with her hands and rocked violently, stopping each time with a jerk just when it seemed that the chair was going to fly off the standard.

"Where's Pearl now?" Louie asked.

"She helps Mrs. Kuhlman at the hotel. Oh, Louie, I hate to have her there with all those travelling men and all those fellows working on the road! But Mrs. Kuhlman asked—and she just had to do something."

"She'll be all right," Louie soothed. "She ought to help you out a little. You've always done too much for her, Mame."

They all knew and talked about how she spoiled Pearl, slaving for her, cooking her special food, making her dresses when they had hardly enough to feed themselves. Mame had done just the same thing for all of them once. They had never complained about it then.

"If we only had them bees now with that paved road," Mame said suddenly. "Ray Sawyer out here, he's done fine with bees."

"But you haven't them now."

"No."

Only that tipsy old beehive full of empty, blackened combs out under the apple-trees. What had become of the rest? The Lord knew!

"I've tried everything I can think of, Louie," Mame whispered tremulously. "Sometimes I thought if one of the boys would lend me enough to get an electric washer—but that's the trouble, it ain't much use here. They're so many of them farmer women moved in and they all do their own work. Besides, that Mrs. Geshenke's got about all the washing. Cleaning the same way. I do a little sewing, but—if I was somewhere else—"

Louie did not follow this up. He was guiltily aware of sharing the general gladness at having Mame and Alick settled safely in Karnak. He knit his brows, pretending to think of something with his mind a blank.

"Louie," Mame said timidly, "I thought if maybe one of the boys—or some of them—wouldn't take the place off my hands since I can't keep it up?" She clasped her hands, rubbing them back and forth, looking anxiously at him. "Then we could go into Grundy or somewhere and maybe get something to do that would keep us."

Louie cleared his throat, trying to be impersonal and judicious.

"Well, Mame, of course I couldn't say. I'd have to talk it over with the boys. We'd all like to help you, of course—but if we could fix it somehow so you could stay right here in Karnak."

Mame kept on, however, with her notion of getting to Grundy. "I thought maybe if Bert—well, if we had to leave the place, you know—Bert's got that big house now and *she* does a lot of entertaining and all—I wondered if maybe they wouldn't want me to come over and help her—"

"Stay there, you mean?"

Mame nodded, looking at him with watery, pleading eyes. "I'd be willing to do it for Pearl and Alick's keep."

Of all suggestions it was the most hopeless. Bert, with his fine new house with its "period furniture" they had all heard so much about. May! who could scarcely notice the existence of Grace and George's Gustie, who always acted as if she did not know that Mosher's, with its plebeian stock and trade, existed. Alick and Mame and Pearl in that house! Poor girl, she could not see the pitifulness of that. May admitting that Alick was her brother-in-law!

"Well, I tell you, Mame," he said shrewdly, "now I've got a notion that Bert's not so rolling in coin as we all think he is. Course he made a lot during the war, but then he's lost a lot since. Bert does a lot of speculating, let me tell you. And it takes a lot to run that family of his. And then—don't let this out—Bert's got it kind of sticking in his crop to run for State Representative and get to Des Moines. Besides, Mame, I don't believe you'd be any too happy working for May, that's my notion of it."

Mame listened, that hope slowly dying out of her eyes.

"I might help Gustie," she said faintly. "But, of course, she's got Maxine."

"Yes," Louie said.

He was glad that his household was known to be too humble to require help. He ought to have added something about George—about the "lot of expense" and all that to blast poor Mame's hopes in that direction. George was a good fellow, but he was close in money matters, like most farmers. He had worked hard for what he had, and he couldn't bear to see any of it go. And H. H.—well, they were all more or less at odds with H. H. He was too shrewd. Bert was dominated by May. Flo—Flo ought to do something for Mame! Hadn't Mame taken care of her household through both those long sieges of illness? Mame had always done so much for Flo—even made her wedding clothes. But Flo was never able to do anything. Oh, no, never!

Louie sat and tried to think.

"Mame," he said suddenly, "can't you ever do anything with that Texas land?"

Mame shook her head, her face all at once inscrutable. "No, it won't sell."

"Have you tried lately?"

She nodded. He knew from the expression of her face that she had not. That was one thing in which Mame was stubborn as a mule. She and Alick had invested their fifteen hundred dollars from the old folks' estate in Texas grazing-land, which was just what Mame and Alick would do. It had never brought them in a cent. The rent barely paid the taxes. "The boys" had always urged Mame to put the thing into Bert's hands, to let him try to sell it, or at least make a trade for her. But Mame clung to it with some desperate notion that it "would be something for Pearl some day." At least they wouldn't die and leave Pearl without anything.

Mame seemed to feel that she was going to get no help from Louie. He wanted her to realize that he could do nothing, and yet this made him feel still more uncomfortable; made him cast about for some suggestion that would take the burden of help from him.

Mame said: "It'd be better if we hadn't stayed here, if we hadn't tried to keep the place. But then somebody had to look out for pa and ma, and of course we hadn't room for them, and you boys was all so anxious——"

Louie grew hot. He felt that Mame had had vague hopes of getting to Grundy and that he had defeated them. This shamed him, too, for he knew that she might have a better chance of earning something there. But it would not do.

He shifted this from his mind, put it off with fears of having Mame and Alick "on his hands," with thoughts of Grace.

He could see no way out of the situation this time. Mame and Alick had always been getting into holes through their

shiftlessness, their innocence, and that big, unthinking generosity of Mame's. All of "the boys" had lent them money at different times. Mame had paid a little to this one and a little to that one, but had settled no debt in full. There was a general feeling among "the boys" that they were through. Louie could not think of one who was likely to do anything this time. When they had secured Alick the janitor's job, they had felt that they "had them fixed."

But Louie said uncomfortably: "I tell you, Mame, I'd like to let you have something to help you through. But you see how it is, I'm in a pretty tight place just now enlarging the business and all—"

"Yes, I know. You'd help me if you could, Louie. Oh, I suppose it'll turn out somehow."

She put her head on her hands, and the tears dripped slowly between her knotted fingers.

Louie could hardly stand it. Only the thought of Grace warned him and held him back now.

"If you could only let me have a little bit to pay on the sewing-machine this month," Mame whispered. "I hate—but my old one give out—it was ma's—and what I earn sewing's about all I take in—"

"Sure!" Louie cried heartily. "Sure! How much do you need?"

"Well—ten, I guess, this month."

He wrote a cheque for twenty, signing his name large and heavy, as Bert and H. H., not Louie, usually did. The sewing-machine would never be all paid for—or he would have to do it. But he guessed he could do that much for his own sister, no matter what Grace might say.

He felt tremendously relieved. Now he could go home with a better conscience.

Mame looked at the cheque timidly. When she saw that it was for twenty instead of ten, she came over beside Louie, took his hands and laid her head on his shoulder, crying.

Louie squeezed her hands. "Don't worry, Mame. It'll turn out somehow."

The ghost of his old affection seemed reproaching him. Yet surely he could not be expected . . .

"Yes. But I don't want to burden anybody, Louie. And I keep thinking of Pearl——"

She sighed. She pressed fondly against him, stroking his hand that was slender and not that of a strong man, with a kind of humble tenderness. She made a vague sound, half a cough.

There was something the matter with Mame—always had been. No one had ever tried to discover what. It might mean treatment, operations—none of them could have that, not Mame herself. It was one of her fears that something might happen to her and Alick, who, as it seemed to the wives, were always having to have something done. Mame would struggle along as she was, used to it, getting along somehow, until she finally died of it some day.

It would mean a lot, after all, not to have Mame here. The loss, somehow, of all the old days, old things. Louie never felt at home anywhere else in just the same way as here on this old familiar lounge with Mame. Not even in his own house, with Grace. He missed in Grace, Lorna, all of them, the unseeking, unexacting tenderness that was for him nowhere now but with Mame. He could do anything and still it would be all right with Mame. To her he would still be Louie. Sometimes he thought bitterly that to Lorna, Edgar, even Grace, he was just "papa," a dependence and source of supply, something entirely adult and without needs or desires of its own. Only Mame seemed to understand the grown-up boy that he still felt himself to be.

Grace was always complaining of how much he had done for Mame, but what was it compared to what she had done for him? Mame would not have stopped to doubt, to consider. But Louie did, and it made him eager to get away.

"Well, I'm afraid I'll have to go back now," he murmured.

"You won't stay to supper?"

"Well, it takes a good while to drive back, you know."

He was ashamed of this, too, for he knew that Mame al-

ways counted on his staying. But he dreaded the meal in that dingy old kitchen, with the tipsy table and the brown oilcloth, with Alick sitting melancholy and old, losing his food before he could bring it waveringly to his mouth, the everlasting apple sauce, the fried potatoes Mame would cook because she remembered how Louie used to like them. There was a very decent little hotel at Perkins where he could stop. He was relieved that she did not urge him this time.

"Well, I'm awful glad you came over, Louie."

"I'm afraid I didn't help you much, Mame. I wish—
maybe—"

He was embarrassed at her gratitude for that twenty dollars, and for the fact that he had not shown open exasperation at her plight, as any of the others would have done. It was the accepted family attitude toward Mame.

She still kept hold of his hand.

"You been real well this summer, Louie?"

"Oh, pretty well, yes, except through that rainy time."

"You don't want to work too hard now, Louie, in that factory. It's so damp. I don't like to think of you there all the time."

"Well, I've stood it fifteen years, Mame." He patted her hand jocosely.

"You let Edgar do more of it, Louie. You better bring Lorna and Grace and come over some time. Pearl'd like to see Lorna again. We're so close, but seems as if we don't get to see anything of each other. Of course I know you're busy all the time."

She went with him to the porch and out to the car, wiping her eyes, but somehow composed again. Louie was very cheerful to take away the sense of having disappointed her, of running off as soon as he could. All the old family difficulties seemed congregated in the old house under the trees. He was anxious to get away from them. He did not say good-bye to Alick—he was asleep now in the camp chair, his head fallen to one side.

"Well, now, I'll talk to the boys about this, Mame," Louie said between vigorous cranks at the Ford. "And don't worry. You'll get out of it somehow or other."

"Yes, I guess so," she said. She stood by the car, in her old sloppy blue house-dress, with a pair of Alick's shoes on her feet, shapeless and half unlaced, the hot wind blowing her thin hair across her face.

"Well, good-bye, Mame."

"Good-bye, Louie. Take care of yourself, now."

6

Louie drove out of Karnak.

He was glad to get away; glad to leave Mame and her troubles behind, as all of them always had done. Anxious to get back to the paved streets, the electroliers, the comforts and comparative prosperity of Grundy. And yet he was wrought up, ashamed of himself and obscurely angry at Grace, feeling a helpless pity at the thought of Mame. After all, when it came right down to it, she was the best one in the family, the best-hearted, the one upon whose affection they could really rely. And yet, of course, they couldn't be expected . . . he knew in his heart that his vague assurances as to "the boys" meant nothing. They with their good houses, businesses—they had always left the mean things to Mame. And got out themselves. Just as he was driving at top speed out of Karnak. And yet what could they do? What could you expect? They had their own families, their own claims. After all, it was each fellow for himself in this world. Mame had had all the hard knocks, somehow. Why did there always seem to have to be one like that in every large family? All of the hard knocks and none of the good things. Why did life always seem to have it in for folks like Mame?

He drove mechanically, hardly knowing when he turned out for another car, or a load of hay. Underneath all his

affection and protest there was an unexpressed satisfaction at having managed to get out so well. Grace would get it out of him about the sewing-machine, though. After all, Mame's troubles were her own. He was ashamed, sorry—but she would have to get out of it somehow.

Uprooted

I



AT had brought "the relationship" together at the old home this summer. She had written that the old folks were getting pretty feeble, especially ma, ever since that fall she had had in the winter, and that it was time something was being done. Everyone had felt that it could not be put off much longer.

They were all in the parlour now. They had come there with one accord after dinner, as if there had been a secret compact among them. There was a general conviction that the time had come to "settle something." The sense of conspiracy that attends family conclaves lay heavy upon them. The air was thick with undercurrents of feeling, schemes, secret alliances and antipathies. They had all eaten too much and they sat with the discomfort of middle age in the stiff old-fashioned chairs. The three men were making a pretence that the whole affair amounted to nothing. They refused to meet the meaning glances, full of dire warning and portent, which their wives cast at them from time to time. Whenever, in a pause of the furious squeaking of Jen's rocking-chair, the clatter of dishes and shrill children's voices sounded loud from the kitchen, they were suddenly stricken, condemned with an obscure sense of guilt.

This was their chance. The old people and the children, who were "not supposed to know," were out of the way. Ma had been persuaded to lie down in her bedroom. Pa had been sent to show the chickens and the cow to Hat's

little Benny. Jen's Margaret and Hat's Allie had been bribed and commanded to wash the dinner dishes. Jen's Herbert had been the worst to dispose of. Just when they thought they were rid of him, he would be discovered in the doorway, staring at them through the big tortoise-shell spectacles that he had just begun to wear, solemn and uncannily disconcerting. Finally Sam had sent him down town with fifty cents to consume chocolate sodas in Vielle's Ice Cream Parlour.

But it was hard to make use of the chance they had tried so long to get. The little parlour was suddenly and overwhelmingly eloquent of the life that had been in it. The close musty air, thick with the smell of the carpet, told that it had not been opened for months. It had a dank chill, even in the clear warmth of the September afternoon. The enlarged pictures on the walls looked as if they had frozen into their silver frames. The closed organ, with its insertions of faded silk, was a tomb of wheezy melodies. The big illustrated Bible with its steel clasp lay beside the Life of Abraham Lincoln—which Art had peddled once—on the knitted lace doily of the stand. Knitted tidies were fastened with ribbons to the backs of chairs. A black memorial card on one of the little balconies of the organ stated in gold that John Luther Shafer had died at the age of thirty-two—"The Lord giveth, and the Lord taketh away." A large pink shell lay beside the door. A bunch of withered pampas grass stuck up from a blue-painted vase in the corner.

The women had entered into a discussion of operations—the one neutral spot on which they could still meet. The men let out a conscientious word from time to time. They crossed and recrossed their knees.

Sam tried to make Lou look at him. He wanted to get back to the hotel. He could not get settled on the bumpy springs of the great orange-plush chair where he was sitting. Sam had grown used to easy-chairs.

"... Oh, yes, it was an awful thing," Lou was saying. "They had to cut away one whole side of the breast."

Tch-tch, went the women's tongues.

"Well—it's a miracle what they can do these days," said Jen after a pause.

Sam gave a bounce in the orange chair. "Well, folkses, isn't it about time we were getting down to business?" he asked, with a heavy assumption of cheerfulness.

A sudden solemn quiet fell upon them all. They cleared their throats and changed positions. The magnificent pretence of a pleasant family gathering which they had been instinctively keeping up was shattered. Sam twisted in his chair with the sense that he had made a social blunder. Lou, who should have backed him up, had put on an air of elaborate unconcern. The other women had a hungry look of suppressed excitement. Little Henry, Hat's husband, who was the poorest and had the least to say, gazed with a mild boredom at his swinging foot.

Sam refused to give up his air of cheerful briskness. He was convicted, but his riches made him bold. When it came right down to it, he had the say-so, and they all knew it.

"Now, let's just talk this thing over quietly among us and come to some decision that will satisfy everyone," he said blandly. He had put that neatly, he thought.

Jen shot a triumphant glance at Art. They had talked it over in the night, subduing Herbert, who had a bed on the floor of their room, and who kept whimpering that they wouldn't let a fellow sleep, by proclaiming that they had matters to discuss which he could know nothing about. But when Margaret, who was in the next room with her Aunt Hat, had come bounding in and announced that they had better shut up if they did not want Aunt Hat to hear every single word they were saying about her, they had been subdued themselves. So they had not got much farther than Jen's deciding that "Sams" ought to take the old folks if anyone did, for they were certainly best able to afford it. "But they'll get out of it some way, you just see if they don't," she had prophesied bitterly.

"Now don't let them make you agree to anything you don't

want," she had warned Art. "I guess we've got something to say in this matter. It concerns us just as much as it does them, and I think the whole relationship ought *all* to decide it *equally*."

But it was hard to be firm in the sight of Lou's elaborate silver *coiffure*. Both Jen and Hat—between whom, as those most likely to be "put upon," there was a defensive alliance—had agreed that it would be all right if they had to deal with Sam alone, but that Lou was sure to be at the bottom of the whole thing. Whatever was done would be Her Doings. There she sat, with her large hard bosom plastered with silver and beading, and her maddening air of being only remotely, and by virtue of her own graciousness, connected with the affairs of the Shafer family. Jen raged inwardly. Lou hadn't always been so much. It was Sam who had made the money, not Lou, but of course he would do whatever *she* said.

"Well—suppose we get started," repeated Sam. "Art, you ought to have something to suggest. You preachers usually have something to say," he added with ponderous jocularity.

Art ran his hand slowly over the wrinkles of his waistcoat. He felt Jen's eyes burn into him. She was sitting rigid.

"Well—of course we want to do what's best for the old people," he began, in his ministerial tone, for which he hated himself.

"Oh, of course, certainly," Sam agreed hastily.

"Yes, but just what *is* best for Mother and Father Shafer? That's what we all want to know," Lou put in sweetly.

Jen gave a jerk. "I'm sure that Arthur and I are willing to do anything," she cried touchily, with her air of putting them all in wrong. "I'm sure that no one has been a better son than Arthur, whether anyone realizes it or not."

Lou smiled inscrutably. They all knew that Sam was Mother Shafer's favourite child.

Art flushed. "It's a delicate thing to decide," he murmured.

"Yes, of course," said Sam soothingly. "We're all willing to do whatever is—of course."

Now that the thing was started, he felt at ease. If it wasn't for the way that confounded chair kept sticking into him! He sat, large and amenable, but prosperous. He had the look of hotels and Pullman cars that made them acknowledge his leadership. He had white hair thinning on a rosy skull, and a neat grey moustache.

"Now, as I've figured it out," he went on smoothly, "it's practically impossible for mother and father to spend another winter here alone. Isn't that about the size of it, Hat?"

"I guess so," Hat muttered.

"Yes, of course. We all see that. The place is in frightful condition. They can't keep it up—"

"They can't be expected to," Lou interrupted.

"No, of course they can't. And they really can't take care of themselves much longer—" Sam paused for confirmation.

Jen rocked, her lips tightly pursed together. It was as she had expected. "Sams" were running the whole thing. Art had given right in to them. Sam was doing the talking, but Lou had put him up to it. She was acting so sweet, but Jen knew there was something back of it.

"Well, then," Sam remarked pleasantly, with an air of putting it all impartially before them, "what shall we do?"

Jen broke violently out of her offended silence. "I think those who are best able to take them, ought to," she cried. "I'm sure Arthur and I are willing enough—no one's more willing—but no one realizes the exactions of a minister's wife. I just escaped being in the hospital this spring. I couldn't stand one thing more. It's just go, go, go from morning to night. I'm just ready to break down now. No one realizes—"

"No, no. Now, we haven't said anything about anyone's taking the old people," Sam interrupted. "All that remains to be decided."

Jen began to rock again, with her lips tighter. Lou smiled. Art's face grew red. He felt guiltily that he ought to offer his home. He was ashamed of Jen, and of himself as seeming to agree with her. He would have put his refusal on a moral basis. It was not that he was not glad and willing to have the old people—but there would be so much confusion, it would mean that he would have to ask his people for an addition to the parsonage, and that would be difficult just now. New London was his first parish of any size, and certain things were expected of him. His father and mother would not fit in. They would not be happy there—

"Perhaps it won't be necessary for them to leave," Sam suggested pacifically. "Perhaps we can make some arrangement here."

"Have you thought of doing this?" Lou observed, smiling. "Of getting some responsible person to stay here and care for Mother and Father Shafer?"

Jen broke out again. "We thought of it, but I'm sure that even if they aren't my own parents I would never consent to leave them to the care of strangers!"

"Oh, I didn't say strangers, I didn't mention strangers," Lou replied with dignity. "You may be sure that Sam would never, never agree to anything of that kind."

Sam cleared his throat deprecatingly. He was thinking that he wished the women would keep out of this thing and let the men settle it. They could do it reasonably and in half the time. The women were always making a fuss and getting stirred up about every little thing. It was time he was taking the thing into his own hands.

"Now, let's—let's—"

He glared at Lou. Why didn't she speak out and not leave the whole thing to him? She had been concerned enough about it last night. It was so confoundedly hard to make suggestions to this bunch, with Hat never opening her mouth and Jen sitting there just ready to fly off the handle if anyone winked. He couldn't do it all and he wasn't go-

ing to. If she couldn't help him, she could take the consequences.

Lou rose smilingly to the rescue. "I think we must all appreciate what Hattie has done," she observed with a majestic sweetness that created an instant atmosphere of suspicion. "She has come here to Lenaville every little while and relieved others of us who are more tied by responsibilities. I think we all ought to thank Hattie."

There was a murmur of polite approval. Jen smiled sardonically. She wanted to ask what responsibilities *Lou* had! With her clubs and her dressmakers probably. Whatever they were, they didn't keep her from gadding all over the country—everywhere but to Lenaville.

Hattie moved uncomfortably. She was a bulkily built woman who seemed to overflow the small cane-seated rocking-chair which she had hitched into an inconspicuous corner. She had always been considered "not like the rest of them," although in some respects she resembled Art. She was said to have his hair and skin, heavy black hair and skin of a thick dark pallor, but the face which she now turned, with a faint instinct of defensiveness, toward Lou, wore a look of protesting stupidity.

Little Henry, who had been summoned from his feed store in Hobart for the conference, still swung his foot and examined the cracks in his finger-tips. No one needed to consider him. He made just enough to get along on. But his air of detachment gave him a pale distinction. It convinced, where Lou's elaborately smiling unconcern aroused distrust.

Lou had not finished. She reached up to adjust a pearl ear-ring that was half sunk in a fold of loose white flesh.

"But we must agree," she continued, "that we simply cannot expect Hattie to keep on coming to Lenaville every month or so. We cannot expect that of anyone."

"I ain't going to do it any more. That's all," said Hattie sullenly.

"Of course not. We wouldn't think of asking it of you. Besides, even such excellent care isn't enough now. Father

and Mother Shafer need someone with them *all* the time." Lou beamed upon Hattie, whose dull black eyes stared back at her uncomprehendingly. "Now it just occurs to me—why couldn't Hattie and—Henry arrange to spend all their time here?"

"Yes, yes, certainly, why not?" exclaimed Art with an instinctive breath of relief. Then his satisfaction withered under the look of contemptuous triumph that Jen shot at him. So that was what *she* had been hatching up! They might have known that a desire to give no trouble to the old folks was not the only reason why "Sams" had stayed at the hotel!

Everyone looked questioningly at Hattie. It was evident that she did not quite take it in. But her look of protest deepened. She glanced hesitatingly at Henry, who was sucking in his lips to the tune of *Marching through Georgia* in a kind of inverted whistle. "Well—I dunno—do you mean live here?" she asked weakly.

Sam plunged briskly in. Now that the thing was out, he was himself again. "Yes, that's the idea—live here. Stay right here with them. If the house isn't big enough, why—I'll see to that."

"You mean—move away from Hobart?" said Hat slowly.

"What about Henry's business?" demanded Art. He felt Jen's eyes upon him. "Would that have to be given up?"

Hat's mouth opened slightly.

"Oh, no, not necessarily," Sam said hastily. "You see, Hobart and Lenaville are only a few miles apart—"

"Forty miles!" ejaculated Art.

Sam waved his hand. "Oh—forty miles! What's forty miles these days? Henry could easily run that business at forty miles. Let that boy of his—what's his name? John, Joe?—stay with the business. Be the making of him. Besides, this place is full of possibilities if someone will take hold and make it go. Pa's let it run to seed the last few years. There's a good living for somebody right on this

place." Sam, who had a large wholesale business in Omaha, smiled inwardly at all this fuss about a feed store.

"And, of course, we intend—Sam and I—to make this entirely a business arrangement," Lou put in blandly.

"Yes, certainly," Sam agreed. "Well, Hat?"

Hat was bewildered. She could not get it straight. She knew that she had not said anything, but Lou seemed to think that the whole thing was settled. Jen, on the other hand, was looking at her with intense sympathy. Hat was dumb, but the spirit which dwelt in her pale bulk of flesh was stiffening and protesting. She had known that they would try to put something over on her, and she was moving cautiously. She had no defence but a mute obstinacy that had got her the name of being as stubborn as a mule.

Art was beginning to regret his first impulsive approval. Every time that he was with Sam and had to witness his older brother's air of riches and assured success, resentment always crept into his heart and finally rendered the companionship intolerable. He had no recourse but to stand up for Henry.

"Perhaps we'd better consult Henry about this," he observed ironically.

All eyes turned for the first time to Henry. He was now swinging his foot as well as sucking in his breath, and seemed to find this arrangement far more absorbing than the question of his removal from the feed business. His creed—never stated—was: Let 'em fight it out among themselves. He sniffed slightly but made no answer.

Art was forced to go on. "It seems to me that it's asking a good deal," he stated in his pulpit manner. "It isn't such a light thing to move a family like that even forty miles. And Henry has his business. Why should he be asked to change? A thing like that can't be settled off-hand."

"I should say not," cried Jen.

Lou leaned forward and smiled at Art. "I thought we

weren't here to decide what was light or easy for ourselves, but what was best for Father and Mother Shafer. If people object to taking them——”

“We don't object to taking them!” cried Jen hotly.

“Oh, pardon me! I thought you said——”

“I said that I thought that those best able to take them ought to. And I say so still.”

“Exactly.”

“But when it comes to forcing Hat into——”

“Now, now, now, now,” said Sam soothingly. “There's no question of forcing. It's entirely for Hat and Henry——Hm!”

He broke off, and the rosy hue of his skull spread downward through his cheeks. Hat's Allie had sidled in through the door. She was a pale snuffy little girl with a wisp of light braided hair. But at sight of her they were all silent. She went up to her mother and began pulling at her skirt and whispering something.

“Whadda you want? Hm?” Hat demanded.

Allie repeated her whisper. “Can't I? *Ma-muh*, can't I?”

“What does she want?” Sam asked.

“Oh, she says she wants to go to the picture show,” Hat said shamefacedly.

“Well, Marg'rut's going,” Allie persisted.

In spite of Jen's warning glance, Art's hand dove into his pocket. But Sam was ahead of him. He held out a freshly minted quarter on his plump glistening palm.

“Oh, let her go, let her go,” he cried heartily. “Here, kiddie, go ahead. That's the place for you. Remember what it's all about, and tell your Uncle Sam when you get back.”

Allie took the quarter, got out a bashful “Thang-kew” to Hat's demand of “What do you say?” and ran from the room. Art surreptitiously slipped his dime back into his pocket.

They all breathed again, but even Lou felt it was impossible to return to the old point. Fate had been personified

by Hat's Allie in wrinkled white ribbed stockings and a gingham dress too short for her. Her appearance had mysteriously changed the course of the argument. Sam himself could not switch it back. It was as if the six children of Hat and Henry, with their demands and clamouring needs, came in with Allie, like the ghosts of the kings in *Macbeth*. Everyone felt that Hat would not come to Lenaville. There was a silence.

"What a difference the motion pictures have made!" Art remarked ponderously.

"She's always wanting to run to them," said Hat apologetically.

Sam fidgeted and tapped his foot. He wanted to get away on the six-ten. He wasn't going to spend another night in that hotel, not with Lou along. The vision of a large leather chair at home, in which the hollows were his own, filled him with home-sickness. It was a terrible thing for a man to be so uncomfortable.

"Well—suppose we get back to business," he said with determined good nature. "Now, if Hat thinks she wouldn't like to leave Hobart, of course that's her own affair. But it means that some other plan must be thought of. What do some of the rest of you think about it? Hat, suppose you suggest something."

"You see," Lou explained hastily, "the reason the suggestion about Hattie's staying was made, was because Sam and I both felt that too much of a change wouldn't be good for Mother and Father Shafer. They're pretty old, you know, and it's hard for old people to adjust themselves. They could hardly make an abrupt change at their time of life."

"No, that's true, of course," said Art, trying not to look at his wife.

"No, I think they ought to stay as near the old home as possible," virtuously agreed Jen. "But, of course, for Hat and her family to come here!"

"Perhaps it wouldn't be the best thing," Lou conceded

graciously. She felt a sudden sense of unity with Jen. "The place is in frightful condition."

"Oh, it is! I don't think they ought to be allowed to live here. It's frightful for them."

"And you know it costs to keep it up," Lou reminded them. "Although of course Sam has been glad and willing to do it."

The rest were silent. Sam made an impatient gesture. "Well—Hat?" he insisted.

Hat flushed dully. She could not help feeling that they were blaming her because she had not offered to come to Lenaville. Now they seemed to think that that obliged her to offer something else. She glanced at Henry. He twisted his mouth and looked inscrutable.

"Well—I don't know. You folks better settle it. You will, anyway," she muttered.

"It's hard to know what to do. It's a difficult thing all round," said Art with solemn satisfaction. Now that his immediate anxiety was lifting, he began to feel the dramatic sense of the occasion. "A difficult thing," he murmured.

"But then these things have to come," said Lou.

"Yes, that's what life is," sighed Jen.

"Well, of course it's hard for them," said Sam with his resolute cheerfulness, "but if you look at it another way, it isn't bad. Suppose we left them alone here through the winter and they fell or got laid up. No one might hear of it for days. They've cared for themselves and others all their lives, now it's time the rest of us are caring for them."

"And they can't possibly be happy here under such conditions," declared Lou, shaking her head. "That kitchen! Someone ought to take hold of it and give it a thorough cleaning. And I should think they'd freeze here in the winter. Boo!" She shuddered, drawing her arms in their transparent black sleeves tight to her body.

"Yes, of course, it can't go on much longer," Art affirmed gravely.

"It's a good thing they have children to look after them," cried Jen.

There was a murmur of agreement. The tension was lifting now and a pervading cheerfulness taking its place. Even Jen felt that things were going well. Only Hat looked suspicious and unconvinced.

"But still we haven't quite come to the point," said Sam, genial but bent upon business. "We haven't said just what is to be done. Now I think we're all agreed—"

He broke off again with an impatient exclamation. This time it was Margaret in the doorway, looking at them with an expressionless stare.

"Grandma's crying in there," she observed coldly.

There was a feeling of consternation.

"Oh, pshaw!" muttered Sam impatiently.

"I thought you had gone down town," said Jen, with a suggestion of reproach. "Where is she?"

"In her bedroom."

Margaret shrugged her shoulders and went out.

There was a hush.

"I expect I better go in," said Hat stolidly.

"Yes, yes. All of you girls had better go," Sam proposed nervously. "Hm! Pshaw!"

Lou and Jen, bustling slightly with a sense of dramatic importance that they could not quite subdue, followed Hat out of the room. The men waited, uneasily watching the brown-painted bedroom door with its knob hanging slightly askew. Sounds of an old woman's sobbing, weak and fretful, came through it, and the low soothing tones of the three women.

"Hm!" Sam murmured uncontrollably, "I was afraid we might have a time."

Lou, mysteriously important, appeared in the doorway. She made a sign to Sam with her eyebrows.

"Will you come here a moment?"

"Can't Hat manage it?"

"No. We need you."

Sam followed his wife into the little bedroom. The black walnut bed, the dingy dresser that lurched forward where

one castor was missing, the painted wardrobe, the china wash-bowl with raised pinkish flowers, the faint smell of bedding and musty carpet—life in the old house rushed blindingly before him.

He stepped awkwardly up to the bed where his mother lay, shaking, and clutching with her brown misshapen fingers at the edge of the patchwork quilt. He tried to pat her gnarled bony shoulder.

“Now, ma! What’s all this?”

The old woman tried to jerk away from him, but the influence of Sam, the first-born and best-beloved, was almost immediate. Her sobs quieted, she fumbled for something with which to wipe her eyes. The sense of shame with which he had been labouring all afternoon caught hold of Sam as he saw the effect that his presence still had. For years he had paid no attention to his mother except to send an occasional cheque which he could easily spare. Hat had thought of her, worked for her, come to see her every few months in spite of the exactions of poverty and a great brood of children—and yet she would do nothing for Hat and was wax at a word from Sam.

She groped with her hand for his. He put it, plump, pink, silvered with hairs, over her knotted fingers with their split and blackened nails.

“She thinks we’re going to do something to her,” Hat announced.

“Why—you don’t think that, do you, ma?” Sam asked weakly.

He bent down to catch what the old woman whispered—“planning something——”

“Why, what should we be planning?” Jen asked with a warning glance at Sam.

He scowled at her. An immense urge to get the thing over and done with, and to get away from these jealousies, undercurrents, pettinesses, came over him. He hated the way that he always found himself acting when he was among “the relationship.” He wanted to get home.

"Now, ma, let's have this thing out. Will you listen—hm?"

He bent close, drawing from her a faint nod.

"That's right. Of course you will."

Her thin grey hair, streaked with brown, that was always drawn smooth and tight from the broad white parting, was wildly dishevelled. The tiny braid that for years she had wound into a hard little knob at the back of her head, was slowly uncoiling like a bit of twisted wire. Sam could see a part of her wrinkled brown cheek drawn up with crying.

"Well, then, you know things can't go on always as they have been. You and pa oughtn't to be left alone this way—it isn't the thing. And there's no reason why you should, when you have children to take care of you."

"That's what I told her," Hat put in, "but she says she don't want anyone taking care of her."

"Oh, now, ma!" This was the thing that Sam dreaded. But he forced his voice to its cheerful sensible tone. "Of course you can take care of yourself, but the time's come now when we ought to do something for you. You've worked hard all your life, and now you ought to let someone else do part of it. That's all Hat meant. Isn't that so?"

She looked suddenly up at him. "Tell *them* to go!" she whispered fiercely.

Sam spoke shamefacedly to Lou and Jen. "I guess you girls had better go in the other room a little while, and ma and I will talk this thing out together."

Sam gave a puff of relief when he was alone with his mother. He felt that he could manage her, if only those women would keep their oar out! He bent down close and whispered to her, so eager to get the thing over and convince her, that he convinced himself. At the same time he felt a sweet melancholy affection for her—she was so tiny, withered, silent, so true.

"Now, see here, ma, I don't like to go away off to Omaha and leave you and pa here alone. Oh, I know you aren't helpless, but just the same something might happen. Like

that fall you had. You might happen to get sick, or pa might, and I tell you it isn't the thing. I don't think you will, but then you might, you know."

"Hat could come," she said resentfully.

"Maybe she could and maybe she couldn't," Sam replied judicially. "One of her children might just happen to be sick at the same time you were, and then where'd you be! Besides, it's hard for Hat to keep coming here every little while. She's got a big family to look after and plenty to do at home, and it isn't always easy to pick up and leave."

The old woman was silent, shrinking away from the moist reassuring pressure of his hand. Dumbness was her only weapon. She felt the struggle between them. Her face grew warily impassive.

Sam went on hastily:

"Now, ma, I think it'd be better all round if you and pa would go and stay this winter with Hat. It—"

"You mean leave here! I knew you were trying to drive us out!" Her face broke up again into violent weeping. She clutched at the quilt.

Sam grew suddenly angry. "Drive you out! As if your own children would drive you out of anywhere! We're trying to do the best thing possible for you, and you make it hard enough! Here I came clear from Omaha—" The sight of his mother, frightened and whimpering, brought him back. "You didn't mean that, of course, ma. But I want you to try and see the thing from a reasonable viewpoint. Of course we want to do the best thing for you, whatever it is."

Her lips quivered uncontrollably, but she managed to whisper: "I don't want to leave here. I've always lived here—all my things is here—"

"I know it, ma, but just for this winter—afterwards we could see—how it worked out!"

He got up suddenly and walked to the window. He could see the lawn, the grass unkempt and withering out under the shaggy trees that grew too thick. The old barn, the

dingy chicken yard, the old one-legged chair fallen tipsily under the apple-tree—— He shivered. He could not leave them here!

“We’ve always got along,” his mother quavered. “I don’t want to be beholden to folks as long as I can do for myself.”

“You wouldn’t need to be. You could do there just the same as you do here.” For the moment Sam conceived this to be true. “Only, in case of anything, you’d be where Hat could look after you. No, you’d help Hat a lot more than she would you. Just think of all you could do with the children.”

Still the dumb, obstinate look persisted.

“Look, here, ma!” Sam exclaimed suddenly. “Would you rather come with me? I said Hat, because I knew Hat was near the old place, and that you’d have the children there—but if you’d rather come with me——”

She looked at him. “No,” she said faintly.

“Well, I didn’t think you would,” Sam said heartily. There had been a sudden rending thought of Lou. “It’s so far and all. But if you—now I tell you what I’ll do. I’ll see to it that you and pa have your own things at Hat’s, if you’d like that better. I don’t blame you.” He forgot that the definite offer of her home had never been made by Hat. “There can be a room built on if necessary. I’ll see to all that. And there you can live, just as snug as you please, much more comfortably than you do here——”

He broke off, for his father’s shuffling steps had come to the door. The old man stood in the hallway, looking hesitatingly from his wife to Sam, with his dim blue eyes.

“What’s ma crying for?” he asked.

He gently put off little Benny’s fingers and came into the room.

“Run away, Ben. Grandpa wants to talk to Uncle Sam.”

He was a very old man. He had great bowed shoulders, a beard like hoar-frost, blue eyes set wide apart with the

unfathomable look of the old peasantry. He wore a shapeless brown coat and slippers with tufted red flowers.

He had done many things—farmed, kept a little grocery store, been janitor at the Court House. Now he just pottered around his barn and grounds, keeping a pig, a horse, and a few bees and chickens, raising vegetables and a little corn, and living upon these things and the cheques Sam sent. He had grown sweeter, vaguer, and more useless with the years. He loved his animals—had a name for each of them—and was happiest of all when he wandered about the yard with little Benny, hunting on the ground for good apples, and singing old songs in his thin, sweet, wavering voice.

"Come in, pa," said Sam impatiently. "Ma and I were just talking about next winter."

The old man stood in the doorway, with that vague, half-frightened look in his eyes.

"I guess I better get my cap," he said uncertainly. "Head's always chilly without. Do you know where the durned thing's gone, ma?"

"I see it a little bit ago. Ain't it on top of the wardrobe?" she asked in a muffled voice from the pillow.

"Oh, yes. How in time did it get up there?" The old man, who had been peering at the bed and the window-panes, got down the skull-cap of black cambric and fitted it carefully over his grey head.

Sam waited nervously. The old man was much blinder than he had been when Sam last saw him, six years ago. It was impossible, unsafe, to leave him alone with the old place through the long cold winter.

"What was you sayin', Sam?"

"We were talking about next winter, pa," Sam said in his most reasonable tones. "Now, I don't think you folks ought to try to stay by yourselves and run this great place. There's no sense to it. It's hard on you, isn't it?"

"Well, I—I don't—" The old man frowned uncertainly.

"They want us to go to Hat's," his wife said in a low trembling voice.

"Why, you mean—visit? I don't know's I care to——"

"He means stay there. They're all trying to make us."

Sam gave an impatient twist. "I don't like the idea of your staying here another long hard winter. You'd have company at Hat's and be well taken care of, and—well, we'd feel better about it all round."

Pa was staring out of the window at the gnarled purplish limbs of the old apple-tree. Comprehension was slowly and visibly dawning in his eyes.

"Why, I'd hate awful to leave the place," he said uncertainly, with a glance at his wife. "I don't know, we been here so long, it'd be awful hard to break away. I don't know what'd become of the beasts—they've got used to me—I wouldn't like to think of anybody else havin' 'em. Peter's been real lame the last year or so. I've kinda looked after him. I don't know, Sam—— Ma, whadda you say?"

"I don't say. They've done the saying. They fixed it among 'em," she finished bitterly.

Then she reached out passionately for Sam's hand.

"Sam, I ain't sayin' it about you. I don't want to go against what you want. You been so good to us, sendin' us money and all. But I wouldn't do it for the others. And I—you gotta let me take what I want with me!" she cried suddenly and vehemently. "I'm gona have my own things. I ain't gona use Hat's."

"Yes, yes, ma. Of course you can take whatever you want. Take everything in the house if you want it. I'll fix all that." Sam almost laughed in a rush of relief, glad to be, in some manner, the generous provider that he loved to be. He only half comprehended that his attitude of displeasure, of impatience, had been enough to make his mother throw to the winds her independence, her home, all the things that she cherished. She had never been able to "stand against" Sam.

"I'll leave you and pa to talk it over by yourselves," he conceded heartily. "You just see if you don't think it's the best thing. You just talk about it a little."

He got out of the room as fast as he could, and let out a long breath of relief. He detested what he called "times." But he had learned in business to go through with them and finish them, and then throw them off.

The others had gone outdoors. Through the partly open door, he could see them moving about the lawn looking for apples in the long shiny grass. He knew how he would appear unconcernedly among them and say cheerfully, in an off-hand way: "Well! I guess that's settled."

But he lingered for a moment in the parlour, and his exhilaration evaporated. He remembered that he would have to tell Hat how easily he had made free of her home. Even promised to build on a room. And had agreed to let ma take her things—

Those things were all about him now. He could not look at the pampas grass sticking up absurd and stiff from the blue-painted vase. The elaborate lace curtains tied back with cords of red plush, the sea shell beside the door, the plants, the ingrain carpet, musty-smelling, and patterned with great sprawling cornucopias of roses—.

"Oh, pshaw!" he muttered.

He turned uncertainly toward the bedroom door, from which he could hear a low murmur. In the intervals the eight-day clock ticked loudly in the kitchen.

No. It was over and done with. He shrugged his shoulders vigorously and put it from him.

It was strange how people seemed to take root in a place. He should think anyone would be glad to leave this rundown, miserable spot. See how the steps were coming apart!

After all, he had to pay the bills and he was entitled to some voice in the matter.

But it was too bad that the way of life was as it was.

As he went out of the house, he realized that he could take the six-ten as he desired. There were arrangements to make, but he could hustle them through in no time if he had to.

He smiled sardonically as he saw Jen's tense listening back.

Lord! He would be glad to get out of that hotel and back to his own home again.

Renters

I

 CROPS were looking fine around Concordia this year. Oats were rather light, but corn was already tasselling out in early July. June had been hot, with plenty of rain; muggy, steamy "corn weather." Grass was rich and thick; weeds along the roadsides—milkweed, sweet clover, ragweed, thistles—were a perfect thicket.

July was starting in a trifle dry; things had already lost their tropical exuberance. There were little sparse, brown patches in the green grass on the lawns. Dust made the roadside weeds look grey. Over the sloping pastures the blue of vervain seemed to float like a dim haze. Still, things were promising. Farmers were saying, standing about Peterson's department store in Concordia, while their wives were buying groceries, on Saturday nights: "Well, if this dry spell don't keep up too long, if it don't turn into a drought before we know it—" That was a good deal for farmers to admit.

On the old Hunt place, which was largely planted with corn, there was going to be a bumper crop. Farmers driving past the fields filled with the tall, dark-green, rustling stalks, with their rich milky smell, said: "Well, Fred and the old lady both ought 'o make something this year."

That was when corn was bringing a good price.

Fred Mutchler was the renter on the old Hunt place. He had been there for four years, had come a few years after old man Hunt had died and the old lady moved into town. Old lady Hunt found fault with him; she had found fault with every man who had ever worked for her. But Edwin Foster, her son-in-law, admitted that Fred was pretty good as far as renters go.

Yes, as far as renters go. Fred could have told more about that from the renter's side. As far as owners go, was what he could have said of old lady Hunt and Edwin Foster. If they had had some experience of renters, he had certainly had some of owners. He had been renting now, more or less, ever since he had been old enough to take to farming. He was still more or less hoping what he had hoped at the start, that he could some day scrape enough together to get a place of his own.

Fred had not had much of a start. That was one reason why it had taken him so long to get ahead, he said; and it was true. His father had left him nothing. And in these days, when the land was all taken up and brought such prices as a young fellow starting in for himself couldn't hope to pay, it was not like it used to be. The lucky ones were the fellows whose fathers had left them a good fat piece of land, like Ed Kirschner, with that three hundred and twenty acres of his; like Roy Lempcke, who already, although he was a hearty young man, had been able to leave his farm to renters and move his family into town. No, there wasn't much in it for the renter. Still, he kept on. He liked farming. He was "cut out for a farmer," his family had always said. And he was still hopeful in general. Other fellows had managed to pay for their land. Maybe he could.

If his father had given him more of a start! His father had been a harness-maker in Ohio. He had come out to Iowa and taken to farming for his health, but he had never

made much of a go of it. He had lost the land and everything he had put on it; had had to move to town, and his wife had taken in washing in the later years to help out. There had been a big family of them, of course. They were still, most of them, scattered about Concordia. The boys had all had to help. Fred had wanted to farm. He had first earned board and room by "hiring out" to old Hiram Woodside, east of town. After that, when he was a young man, he had worked for Rob Burke in the Irish colony near McGuire.

That was where he had met Beth. She had been working for Rob Burke's wife, "helping in the kitchen." Before the summer was out, they had got Rob Burke to lend them his two-seated surrey one day, and had driven into town with Fred's brother Lew and Lew's girl to be married at the Methodist minister's.

They had had nothing, of course, to start on. The first baby was born some time before he was properly expected. But they were hopeful of getting along. They were going to rent, they said, and then some day have a place of their own.

Then began the succession of farms. First, Fred had worked for Diggs, the stock-man, who imported fine Belgian horses. That had seemed like a pretty good place. On the strength of it, he and Beth had bought some furniture and a nice clock. No one had thought that Diggs would go bankrupt the way he did. Fred had found himself out several months' wages, and part of his furniture not paid for and another baby coming. And then there was all that terrible affair—Fred going into the barn and finding Diggs hanging from the rafters.

They had had to take what they could get. Fred worked for another farmer for the rest of the summer. They were behind. Beth was pretty sick this time. They lost the baby.

It took Fred another year or two to get straightened out again. He worked in Concordia for a time at whatever he

could find to do. They lived in a little old, ramshackle house that had been left behind in the business street.

Next, wasn't it Gus Niederfranck he had worked for? He had rented one of Gus's farms; had done pretty well for two or three years. It was while they were there that Harold had been born, and little Ben. But this renting business had seemed so slow! Fred couldn't see that they were getting anywhere. Land in Iowa was too high; a poor man had no chance there. Suddenly he had "picked up" and taken the whole family into Dakota.

That had been an unfortunate move, as plenty of people had predicted. They had had one failure after another there. After a few years of it, they had been glad enough to come back to Wilson County and get another farm to rent. They had taken one of Doc Slater's farms. They weren't quite so particular now.

The Dakota venture had put them behind. And then they had another run of ill luck—the luck that pursues renters and under dogs. Fred had cut his foot on a rusty nail, and blood-poisoning had set in. They had gone still deeper into debt for his doctor's bills. Little Ben had had infantile paralysis; it had left him with a crippled leg. They had lost another baby. And then Doc Slater had been angry at the trouble and loss involved. He had seemed to blame Fred for it; there was a rumpus. The Mutchlers found themselves without a farm to rent, and needed everything.

Then they had rented the old Hunt place. The Hunt farm was one of the best in the neighbourhood of Concordia, a beautiful two hundred and fifty acres of rich, rolling land, with a wide green pasture through which Soldier Creek ran under low-hanging willows. It had once been the show place of Soldier Creek Township. People had driven out from Concordia to see the grove, with its evergreens planted to form a circle, and its "May-pole tree" sent from England. It was one of the old farms of the county. The house had been built in the days when a man expected to make

a home of his farm. It was a big white house, with deep shuttered windows and three porches. The large front yard, with its lilacs and syringas, was inclosed in a fancy wrought-iron fence. There was a smaller house for the renter. And the land was good, every inch of it. A renter ought to make something here, if he could anywhere.

The Mutchlers needed it; they were all "out of everything." When they moved there, the children hardly had decent clothes in which to go to school. What furniture they had left after moving out to Dakota and back was in dreadful shape. When they began to think of things that they needed, they didn't know where to stop: they wanted to take Ben to Des Moines to the children's hospital; there was "that pain" that Beth kept having, to which they dared not pay much attention; Fred's teeth—but then his teeth would have to go. Old bills "from away back." There was one thing that they had to have—a car. Fred had succeeded in getting on the track of an old third- or fourth-hand one through his brother Jay, who worked transiently in garages.

They drove into town in that, a rickety old contraption, with the top gone, the spring gone from the front seat, not much left of it but the skeleton. But old as it was, it required petting. There were always repairs for it, Beth said bitterly, always whenever she wanted anything at all.

A shabby country family. Fred, a lank, skinny fellow, with thin, light hair and bad teeth, several of them gone; a good-natured, ingenuous face that was getting vaguely cynical; yet with still an indefinite look of youth about him. Beth was at the same time stocky and thin, with the worried-looking face of the driven mother. When she went into the grocery store to do her buying, she stood back among other rather silent, bashful women, the baby in her arms, Ben and Harold hanging near her; in an ancient rough, brown coat, an old thick, dark-blue knitted tam pulled down over her head, a few light wisps of hair escaping. She never felt like

pushing forward to the counter. The Mutchlers were not "good pay."

Sometimes she and Fred went through old useless arguments.

"We ain't ever going to make anything. Why do we keep on? Why don't we go into town and quit trying to get anywhere farming?"

"What better off would we be in town? Whad da yuh think we'd do there?"

There was no answer to that. But she would think of all the things that needed to be done. She would get wild sometimes. She would nag Fred about it, although she didn't know what good that would do. He could not make more than the farm would bring in. Fred worked hard; he did his best. But she raged inwardly; it seemed, if *she* had it to do—— Little Ben, was he to go through all his life a cripple? And was she never going to have anything that she needed in the house? The county nurse had sent word that Harold and Ben were undernourished and that Harold's tonsils were bad. There were so many other things that needed to be done that they couldn't even think of that.

Fred would answer her back. Yet he was patient. It would all come down to this:

"Well, I know as well as you do what all we need, but I gotta get caught up before I can start in anything more. Where do you suppose I'm going to get the money to do all that? Ain't I working now as hard as I can? And then the most of it goes to someone else."

That was what embittered both of them. They might work as they pleased, and still the most of it went to someone else.

But they had had to live a good deal from hand to mouth. They had the faculty of being cheerful when things were

going well. Now that they were on the Hunt place, they settled down, hoping to stay for a while. At last they seemed to be getting somewhere.

Some of their old bad luck had followed them. They had lost the only cow in the herd that was their own, a good Holstein. Of course that had to be the one that was struck by lightning. There was that bad summer when the weather wasn't hot enough to ripen the corn. There was sickness as usual.

But, on the whole, things were better. They settled back for a breathing-space. Last year's crop had been pretty good; they were beginning slowly to "get caught up" a little. They dared hope for nothing more until that was done. They didn't talk much about a farm of their own now.

And this year things were going really as they should. Early in the season Fred had talked as he always did: "You wait and see. Something will happen. Has it ever failed?" But when May was over, and things still looked promising, he began to say non-committally: "Well, we'll wait and see; I don't trust it. We won't say anything yet." Now, although he would sometimes ironically suggest that it was about time for one of them to get sick, he was dropping that cynical manner that he had adopted as a kind of armour against pursuing misfortune.

It kept on being a good season. Beth did not say anything yet, but she began to think about things they would do. If they once got caught up—— She couldn't think any further. Pretty soon she would say something about Ben's going to the hospital. She even began to think about what they needed in the house, about clothes, although she knew they couldn't have everything at once. They were just beginning to get caught up on their back bills.

Now that there was some hope of getting somewhere, Fred really worked. He began to straighten up, to get a different look. Often he got out of bed before four, when the sun had not yet tinted the east, leaving Beth asleep, with her arm around the hot, moist, white-fleshed body of the baby, in the

little downstairs bedroom, with the shades down to keep out the morning light. He had not done that before. He had got up early enough, but he had said he wasn't going to kill himself.

He made the boys work, too. Elmer, the eldest one, could help him a good deal, and there were some things that Harold could do. Elmer wasn't any too much inclined to work, unless it was pottering around that old car.

Fred had got up early this morning. Beth wakened to find his place empty, the sheet thrown back, a little dusty hollow in the pillow where his head had lain.

She withdrew her arm from under the baby, who rolled and made a little cry. She put on a dark-blue bungalow apron and stole barefoot out of the room. She sometimes did that; she had got used to it out in Dakota, where she had actually been without shoes for a while.

She did not see Fred. She went around to the front of the house and stood on the porch, screened with thick wild cucumber-vines. A still country morning, with the smell of coming heat scorching through the coolness. Dew heavy, like a gleaming crust on the long grass, on the freshly opened nasturtiums along the edge of the porch. She had planted those this spring. The evergreens in the grove were motionless, the drive to the road was mysterious and hushed. The sun was a fire-red ball, round, like a harvest moon, just above the sky-line in the east.

She stood there a moment. She felt something good in the beginning of the day, something that she hadn't felt for a long time, with the need to hurry from the minute she got up, constant exasperations that she couldn't help.

Fred crossed the road from the big barn. She called out to him:

“Where you been?”

He came around to where she was.

“I went out to the barn to take a look at that Jersey. I thought she was kind o' off her feed last night.”

“Well, how was she? All right?”

"Yah. Oh, I thought she would be, but then I wanted to see. I don't want the old lady to be able to say I've lost any of her cattle for her."

He sat down on the edge of the porch. Beth felt like sniffing a little because he had got up early to look after the old lady's cow; but, then, how could she, when she was always urging him to do more and make more? She couldn't help resenting the old lady Hunt.

Fred said meditatively:

"Gosh, Beth, things do look good. You ought to see that west forty. I'd like to have old mother Hunt take a look at it."

"What's she know about it?" Beth asked contemptuously.

"Well, I'd like to show her what kind of a crop her farm can raise when it has to."

"She'd raise the rent, it's about what she'd do."

"Oh, she's a kind of cantankerous old piece, but I've always got on with her pretty good," Fred said tolerantly.

"Well, you ought to. You work hard enough for her. She knows she wouldn't get another such renter in a hurry," Beth said jealously. "You're always willing to do anything for anybody you work for."

That was an old bone of contention. Beth thought that Fred was too easy. He didn't stick up for his rights. He let the owner walk over him.

She looked across the drive at the big house. It stood empty. Old lady Hunt, who was known as "particular," had not been able to stand the thought of having renters in it. Beth, who had no time to keep the thirteen rooms of the big house, with their light wainscots and window-sills, clean, was yet secretly pleased to see, when she looked through the big, blank, small-paned windows, that the wall-paper was dangling from the ceilings, and the floors rotting in the musty damp. She kept Fred rigidly away from the front yard inclosed in the iron fence, as specified in the lease. He would good-naturedly, for the sake of the yard, he said, have set Harold or Elmer to cleaning up some of the fallen branches,

as the old lady hinted. He said it hurt him to see a fine old place like that going to pot. Beth would not have it. The fence was rusting, and the gate, with an elaborate scroll top, such as the gates of cemeteries have, hung desolately forward. The yard was a wilderness, and the grove, which was also specified as "hers," because she was afraid the children might want to play there, was full of the rusty branches of fallen evergreens.

"She'd better come out and live in her wonderful house herself if she don't want it to fall to pieces," Beth muttered. "I don't know that we'd have hurt it much more than standing idle's done."

Although she felt at home in the little house, she was even resentful when old lady Hunt and her daughter, Mrs. Edwin Foster, invited themselves in.

Fred said, yawning and stretching:

"Well, I better get the boys up. I want Elmer to take the car and go over to McGuire for that lumber."

"Yah, and I'd better be gettin' breakfast."

He stared across the yard, a little sombre.

"Gosh, I hope nothin' happens now. I hope we get some rain when we ought to. If things turn out as good as they look now, maybe we can get caught up a little."

"Yah, and then how much farther along would we be?"

"Well, we'd be that much farther."

"There's so much needs to be done," Beth said hopelessly. She did not feel hopeless. But, then, they never both talked hopefully at the same time. That would have been like asking too much of fate.

"Well, we'll see," Fred answered. "Maybe we'll have something yet."

He had a different look about him when he went out to the field after breakfast. He looked as if he knew what he wanted to do, as if there were some use in it. He was beginning to look ahead.

Beth felt hopeful, too, after he had gone. Light and easy, somehow. Now she could dare to plan a little again. She

could draw a free breath. She heard Ben's iron brace on the bare floor. It did not send quite that old hopeless dull ache through her. Now she began to feel that maybe they could do something for him some day. She did not get so exasperated at having "nothing to do with." Not when there was some hope of having something.

It was almost like a holiday. Elmer was gone, Fred and Harold had gone out to the south forty to mend fence. They had taken their lunch with them. There would be only Ben and the baby and herself for dinner.

That nice free feeling stayed with her. After dinner she took some sewing out on the lawn under a maple-tree.

The place looked so pleasant. She realized that she had come to feel at home. She thought of their shack in Dakota, out on the burning treeless plain, of other places where they had lived.

A mourning-dove called from the lonely over-wooded grove, making the stillness more still. A little light breeze rattled among the glittering leaves of the big cottonwood at the end of the drive. The shining white chickens were all crouched in a snowy group in the hollows they had made in the dry bare earth beside the house. The big house across the drive stood in a hot mysterious silence, Hollyhocks burning pink against the wall. Over the pasture-land at the west the blue of vervain seemed to hover, to waver and shimmer a little, like a haze in the heat. The baby, its plump, damp legs bare, crept around over the long grass near Beth's chair. Ben sat near her on the grass.

"Ma," Ben was saying, "now you didn't let me drive to McGuire with Elmer, and you got ta make pa take us in to the movies, then, Saturday night."

"Well, maybe," she said.

They went sometimes, but always Beth had a feeling that they were going defiantly, that they oughtn't to do it when they hadn't even their bills paid. But she thought maybe they could go Saturday night.

She heard an automobile in the road and leaned forward

to see if she could make out whose it was. Then it turned into the drive. A big black car, Mrs. Edwin Foster's! There she was in the back seat, and old lady Hunt! The girl driving was Cornelia Foster. Beth rose, thinking:

"Why did *they* have to come to-day?"

She was suddenly aware of the enormity of sitting here sewing, not canning or out helping Fred, as she supposed they thought she should be.

The car stopped near the windmill, and Mrs. Foster called out cheerily:

"Hello! hello! Anyone here?"

"They saw me," Beth thought. She went slowly up to the car.

Mrs. Foster leaned forward, smiling.

"Hello! Just thought we'd drop in and see how things were getting along."

She was a thin, over-cheerful, over-smiling woman, dressed with elaborate girlishness in a bright-coloured blouse and a satin skirt. She had dry, frizzled hair, prominent teeth, and eager eyes with scanty lashes. Old lady Hunt sat far back in the corner, as if she had been carefully put there to stay. She was very old, very frail. Her ponderous head kept shaking. But there was something about her small eyes, in their sagging pockets of yellow, purple-tinged flesh, that warned one to be careful. Cornelia sat with her capable, tanned hands on the wheel, staring coolly and impersonally ahead. Beth noted her face under the small, white sports hat, round, firm, plump, with a fine skin, a fringe of dark hair on her smooth, moist forehead, cool grey eyes set in flesh as pure and unblemished as a child's. Beth felt defiant before old lady Hunt and Mrs. Foster, but Cornelia's cool unseeing presence abashed her. She was just a part of the landscape, the renter's wife. She could not help keeping a veiled gaze on Cornelia's fresh black-and-white sports suit, her white-shod foot touching the brake, the detail of the black leather wrist-watch on her firm, round arm.

"Stopping?" Cornelia asked impersonally.

"Oh, yes; I think so, dear, now that we're here." Beth could see that Mrs. Foster was a little anxious and conciliatory with Cornelia. "We want to see Mrs. Mutchler a minute."

Cornelia curtly shut off the gas.

Beth asked doubtfully:

"Won't you come in?"

"Thank you, Mrs. Mutchler; yes, I think we will to get cooled off a moment. Coming, mother? Shall I help you out?"

She stepped out, Beth noting her thin ankle in its silk stocking, and the elaborate buckle on her pointed slipper. Old lady Hunt sat, looking significantly around, as she always did when she came. Well, there was nothing that was wrong, was there? Beth defied her to find fault. But she could not help an unreasonable feeling of guilt when she saw the old lady glance at the big house, with its wild lawn and unkempt grove. That was her own fault, but Beth could not help feeling responsible.

"My! Place looks turrible to pieces," the old lady mumbled.

"Getting out, Cornelia sweetheart?" Mrs. Foster asked.

"No, I think I'll stay here," Cornelia answered carelessly. She gave Beth a slight nod.

Beth did not want any of them to come in. Yet her thought beat angrily and helplessly at that attitude of Cornelia's, not even thinking it worth while to get out of the car.

Beth looked at Mrs. Foster's thin, corded arms stiffened and raised to lift her mother out. The old lady got to the ground with difficulty. She had a thick, shapeless, sunken figure, and she wore, as always, a black dress and a little ancient black, crushed hat, with a bunch of flowers at the side, that looked as if someone might have sat on it. Mrs. Foster guided her carefully toward the house, she erect and stalking in her high heels, looking about with bright eyes and a smiling flash of prominent teeth.

"Will you sit out here or come in the house?"

"Well, you are cosy out here; but I think mother feels the sun, perhaps, and we'd better go inside."

"Wants to see how I keep things," Beth thought.

She opened the screen door, with its fringe of faded pink paper at the top to keep out flies. She had not yet got Elmer to mend those holes in it. She was doubtful, stiff, feeling shabby and poor again beside Mrs. Foster's girlish finery, with Cornelia sitting out there cool and perfect in the car. They were easy, feeling themselves the owners, Mrs. Foster smiling and patronizing, the old lady Hunt more frankly looking around.

"I haven't cleaned up very good this week," Beth said. She whisked a little piece of Ben's underwear from a chair.

"Oh, it's all right," Mrs. Foster assured her, graciously; but her eyes were travelling over the room.

It was bare, a farm-house room. There were no curtains at the windows; just the green shades, with little pin-pricks through which the sharp sunlight came. The old battered, scanty remains of furniture showed up pitilessly clear. Clothes, stockings, were scattered about, although the place was not dirty. But it was evident that no one had much time to spend on it.

"My dear, I *wonder* if we could have a drink of that lovely cold water," Mrs. Foster gasped. "Will you bring us some?"

Beth went out to the windmill. She glanced at Cornelia, sitting in the car with knees crossed, her grey eyes cool and remote, not looking up. Beth felt humble as she pumped the water. Cornelia's manner was not even insolent. She didn't see Beth at all.

Beth brought in the water in her best glasses, heavy tumblers with a horseshoe on the bottom. There was a little chill mist on the glasses that made her hands damp.

Mrs. Foster exclaimed and enthused.

"Oh, this wonderful water! *None* in town tastes like this. I wish we had it still. This will cool you off, mother."

The old lady drank in short sucking gulps.

Beth carried the glasses out to the kitchen. Why need *they* be so hot, just driving around in that big car?

The old lady had been pondering for some time. Now she got out thickly, trying to point:

"That window-glash broken."

"The storm broke it," Beth said briefly.

"Looksh awful bad."

Mrs. Foster asked cheerfully: "Well, how are the crops coming?"

"Pretty good, I guess."

"They look fine. Mr. Jensen has *wonderful* corn, I noticed as we drove past."

"Fred's looks just as good," Beth said.

"Where is Mr. Mutchler this afternoon?" Mrs. Foster asked brightly, carelessly.

Beth stiffened with instinctive wariness as she reached down for the baby. "He's out at the south edge, mending fence. Did you want to see him?"

"Oh, no; no, no. Just wondered—"

"What shay 'bout fence?" Mrs. Hunt demanded anxiously.

"He's mending it, mother. Mending it," Mrs. Foster repeated distinctly, nodding and smiling.

"Why, was it broke?"

Beth said nothing. She crushed down the feeling of anxious humility and propitiation that made her want to answer and explain. She smoothed the baby's light, fine hair.

"Oh," Mrs. Foster exclaimed, as if with a sudden inspiration, "I wonder if there are any raspberries now."

"I thought they wouldn't forget those," Beth thought. There were only a few, just enough to make another mess for supper; and of course they would have to come and get them! She said:

"Yes, there's a few ripe again."

There was a waiting silence. Beth kept her lips resolutely shut. She was not going to rush out in the heat and

pick berries, as she had done the last time. They had legs just as much as she had. Let them go and pick the berries if they wanted some.

Mrs. Foster raised her eyebrows slightly.

"Well, perhaps we can go and pick some," she said, with a significant look. "It's very warm, especially driving."

Beth sat silent.

The old lady mumbled something about the house.

"House, mother? Oh, yes; you want to go through the house now? Yes, in a moment. Mother thinks so much of the old house! It's falling dreadfully into decay, isn't it?"

"Yes, it is," Beth said.

"Well, mother, shall we go over? Oh, yes, have you something we can put the berries in? Well, that's pretty large to carry. Yes, *that* would be better. Mr. Mutchler can stop for it some time when he comes into town." She gave a hard, bright smile. "Good-bye. Good-bye, my little man." She flipped the baby under the chin.

Beth watched them cross the drive and go up the grass-grown path to the back door of the big house. "Don't you want to come, darling?" she heard Mrs. Foster call. She saw Cornelia leap down from the car and lounge up the path, yawning. She paid no attention to her mother and grandmother, who kept calling and appealing to her. She seemed to find interests of her own—the hollyhocks, and then the grove into whose dark wilderness she presently disappeared. The others examined the windows, the cellar-door, which was rotting away. Beth watched them, looking remote, dramatic, as if in some picture, as they moved on unknown errands about the old white house in the burning sunshine. They went inside. Beth could seem to hear the hollow sound of their steps as they walked through the empty, high-ceilinged rooms.

She went back into her own house. She felt safer there. She was always uneasy, on the defensive, when the owners came. She hated the sense of patronage in their air: the

hard, bright way in which Mrs. Foster looked about her, authoritative, never forgetting that "it would all be hers some day"; the cool, dreamy, unconcerned way in which Cornelia helped herself to flowers or berries or whatever she happened to see; and then the snooping and faultfinding of the old lady.

Beth saw the two come out of the house and go about the lawn, "taking in everything." There was an anxious search for Cornelia until she finally sauntered back through the grove. Then they started out for the raspberries, the old lady, too, although she could hardly totter. "But she has to see everything," Beth thought.

It was like them to run off with her milk-pail, and then tell Fred to go after it. Cornelia was carrying it, swinging it carelessly by the handle. Of course it didn't occur to them that it was the only good pail that Beth had, and that she might need it. And it would not have occurred to them to bring one of their own. "We can get one at the farm," they would have thought.

What had they really come for, if they didn't want to see Fred? Just to go through the old house? Or for those few raspberries? That might have brought them.

Finally they came back to the car and drove away. Beth murmured:

"Well, thank Heaven!"

4

But she could take no more comfort in this day. Their visit had spoiled it, whether they had really been "after anything" or not. She couldn't feel the same toward the house, feeling still their roving proprietary glances, which said so plainly that everything belonged to them. She was just there at their will. What was the use of planting nasturtiums and things about their house?

What if they did get caught up? They would still be only renters, still subject to old lady Hunt and Edwin Foster.

What was there ahead? The place was pleasant, the best they had had; but how could she take an interest in it when they might drop down any time, as they had to-day? She didn't trust that visit. There was something back of it. "Glash broken"—as if she could help the storm! She had wanted Fred to tell the old lady about it, to ask to have it repaired. He hadn't wanted to just then, had said that there was always so much that needed doing worse than that. Now she thought angrily: "We're not going to pay for that ourselves, we're not going to patch up their house!"

They had come driving out in their big car. It seemed to her that they had everything they wanted. And who did the work? Fred. What did he get out of it? Scarcely a bare living. Think of the way he'd got up this morning. Would the old lady thank him for that? She would take it all for granted. Where did the Fosters get their money? They would never have had it if old man Hunt had not left so much land. This was only one of his farms. He had them scattered all over the county. He had bought them in the early days when land was cheap, he and his father and brothers, the whole Hunt tribe. But the Fosters and old lady Hunt had done nothing to get that land.

She blamed Fred, too. Why was he so good-natured, why did he always let people impose on him? Why didn't he grab all he could and give them as little as possible? That was the way that people got things.

Ben was pleading:

"Ma, let's go down to the crick."

"No!" she snapped crossly.

She could not stand the sight of little Ben in that iron brace.

All her old wants and desires burned in her as she went about the kitchen. She banged pans and cupboard doors.

She was frying the potatoes when Fred came in. He went straight to the wash-basin and began to scrub his face and hands. She could tell from the very stoop of his back that something was wrong. Had old lady Hunt been after him?

She did not question him right away. She, too, had her grievance to work out. She would do it by telling Fred that "they" had been here, by complaining about the cool way that they did things. She would work some of it off on Fred. The stoop of his shoulders made her angry. She was angry at his face, with all those teeth gone. She wanted some assurance of being equal to the Hunts and Fosters.

But she felt uncertain as he ate silently, propping himself by one arm on the table. She could not begin as decisively as she had thought she would.

"Well," she began, "I had some visitors to-day."

"I know you did," he answered without interest.

"How did you know? Did you see them? Who were they?" she demanded incredulously.

"Oh, the dear old lady and her dear daughter," he said bitterly.

"How did you see them?"

"How? Because they drove out to see me."

"They did?" She had known it, somehow, but she didn't want to believe it. "Why, she asked where you were, and said she didn't want to see you. Did they drive way over there?"

"Yes, they did."

He got up, left the table.

"You didn't eat your pie," Beth called sharply.

"Don't want it. Hustle through now, Harold. You know what chores you've got to do."

She heard him go tramping through the rooms and out to the front step.

"What did they want of papa? D'you know?" she asked in a low voice of Harold.

He shook his head.

Elmer came home. She warmed up some potatoes for him.

"You boys do the milking to-night," she said. She felt a foreboding. She tried to think that the old lady had just rubbed Fred the wrong way with her fussing.

It was late when she finally went out to the porch. Fred was hunched over on the step, gloomily smoking his pipe. He had let the boys look after the chores, had not even been out to the barn. The porch was a little box of a place. The cucumber-vine, which had grown heavy and thick-leaved, shut it in in a dusky sultriness.

"Well," Beth finally demanded, "what did the old lady say this time to upset you?"

Fred knocked his pipe viciously against the post. Beth knew that brooding, sullen look of his.

"Well?"

"Well," he replied, with a bitter laugh, "just told us to get out, that's all."

Beth stared. Fred laughed with savage enjoyment of her dismay. He began to speak very distinctly and impersonally, with a measured, calm bitterness:

"Oh, she didn't say it. It was Mrs. Foster, darling daughter. Thought she'd tell me before I made any plans for next year. As if she didn't know I'd already made 'em, and right with her and Ed Foster, too. Dear Nephew Milton thinks 'he would like to try his hand at farming'" —he mimicked savagely—"and so they felt they ought to let him come here on their own land."

Beth was too full of the other thought to even notice this.

"Yes, but how can they tell us to get out?" she demanded. "Didn't you have an understanding with Edwin Foster that you were to have the farm again?"

"Understanding!" he echoed bitterly. "Of course I did; but what's that? He won't pay any attention to that if he don't feel like it, long as I can't prove anything."

Beth said wildly:

"Well, why didn't you have it fixed so you could prove something? You always let people run over you."

"Yes! Didn't I say I'd do that fence-mending and put in that new clover crop if I was sure I'd be here long enough to make it worth my time? And he told me to go ahead.

He's told me a dozen times I could stay as long as I give him good returns in crops; that he was darn glad to get someone that would."

"Well, then, see him about it. Make him hold to what he said."

"Make him hold to it! I'd like to see anyone make a lawyer hold to anything he don't have to."

Beth was fighting breathlessly for what she had had.

"How can he go and do that now? What made you trust him, anyway? Ain't they satisfied with what you've done here? What more do they want?"

"Oh, it ain't that," Fred said, lapsing into gloomy listlessness. "You ought to have heard Daughter Minnie honey around about that. I've got this place into good shape, and you bet they're smart enough to see it and take advantage of it, too. I've worked this place this year——" He gave a dazed look around. "Yah, been better for me if I hadn't. Now it's in good shape for Milton Foster to let it go to the dogs."

"Milton Foster!" Beth exclaimed.

"Sure. Didn't you hear me tell you they wanted it for him?"

"Him! What's he know about farming?"

This was the worst of all. Milton Foster. She had seen him in town, a thin, pimpled boy who wore coloured silk socks and spent his time aimlessly hanging around the pool-hall and soda-fountain. He farm! Everyone knew what he was except the Fosters and the Hunts, who must always keep up the fiction that no member of their own "tribe" could ever do wrong. He was the son of Perry Foster, Edwin Foster's brother and law partner. Beth had often heard the tales about him, with a certain gladness at discovering fallibility in old lady Hunt's family—how he "ran with" those tough Snyder girls, how he had been "requested to leave" Gunter College, how he had never been able to keep any of the jobs that his father had found for him. Now he was to have the old Hunt place!

"They just want to get that Milton out here where folks can't see what he does with himself," she cried.

Fred gave her a sick, hopeless look.

"It's just that he's a Foster," he said. "That tribe all runs together. They're a clannish bunch. I knew they grudged me the little I've made off the place. I tell you, the old lady couldn't stand it, nor daughter neither, to have anyone outside the family getting a little something out of this. Just like they'd rather have the old house fall to pieces than have someone in it. But they waited," he cried bitterly, "they waited until I'd worked and got the place in shape to really do me and them some good."

Beth sat angrily silent, not ready yet to admit the defeat of her hopes, to acknowledge that they must go back to the same old scraping and doing without again.

"They all do that way," Fred said. "They lay up a wad and move into town, and then they expect someone else to work their farms for them, and they can still get all they used to get. They expect a man to take care of it like it was his own, and then any time they can send him off. Well, I ain't gonna do it. I ain't gonna work any of their farms for 'em again and get the little end."

"Aw, you will, too," Beth muttered.

"I won't, I tell you!" He fell to bitter brooding, said with cynical hopelessness: "Oh, well, it's their farm. They can do what they please with it, I s'pose. Anyway, no one can stop them. If they'd told me this spring, even. But they were afraid I mightn't work just the same. And I wouldn't have, either. There's a hundred things I'd never have done if I'd dreamed I wouldn't be on the place next year, and all right if I hadn't, too. They wouldn't have told me now, but they're all going off on a trip to Colorado. Don't see how the old lady dares get that far off."

Beth thought:

"And here they come for raspberries and took my only good pail!"

For a moment this seemed, worse than anything else.

Then she broke out into angry denunciation of Fred.

"Why do you let 'em treat you like that? How can we ever do anything if we have to pick up and start all over again? You say you won't rent. You will rent! And it'll be just the same again. I thought we were getting ahead a little this time." Her voice broke into rebellious sobs that were loud in the still country night.

"So did I think we were," Fred said. "Do you think I'm pullin' out of my own accord?"

"The teacher said Harold had bad tonsils," she accused him. She could not even speak of Ben. She clung wildly to the bit of hope that she had possessed.

"Well, is that my fault? Don't I wanna do things as much as you do?"

"Yes, but you never will while you just go on renting farms of folks."

She looked at Fred. He made her angry. Under the savage bitterness of some of his words there was always that something appealing, something childish and ready to trust people, in his eyes. Oh, he was a good worker and he was honest, but it needed something more than that to get ahead. Something hard was what it needed. Old lady Hunt had it, and Mrs. Foster showed it in that bright, glittering, mean smile she could turn upon you. Why wasn't Fred like that?

Already he was getting used to the idea of having it all to do over again. She hated his patience. She threw words against it in angry rebellion.

"What did she say?" she demanded.

"I told you what she said."

"You needn't take everything anyone says."

"It's their farm, ain't it? They can do what they like with it."

"I s'pose——" She asked jealously after a moment: "What did the girl say?"

"What should she? It wasn't none of her look-out." Fred went on. "What's a fellow gona do? He works and does the best he can with the land he's on, and then they

want it for someone else. And if he don't work, he has to leave. He has to leave anyway. There ain't nothing in it for the renter. There's nothing unless a fellow owns the land he's on."

"And that we'll never do," Beth said bitterly.

What was the use of talking? She felt herself going back, back into dark depths of old hopelessness that she had known before. She needn't have hoped; she might have known. Why should they have anything? She could smell the rich ripening corn in the hot night. It swelled her bitterness. The farm belonged to the others. They could send her off if they chose. She had nothing, was nothing. Work didn't matter.

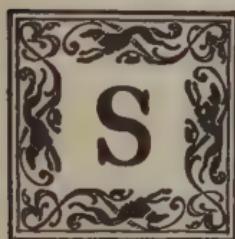
Fred sat with his elbows on his knees, his head sunk into his hands. She looked at him curiously, half bitterly.

"Well, if you ain't gona rent, what are you gona do?" she demanded. She waited.

"I don't know," he muttered after a while. "What is there to do?"

They sat silent. Crickets shrilled somewhere in the damp. They could smell the corn. The grove was a patch of blackness. A calf mooed. What did they have to do with it all? Fred rose heavily. He was going off to the barn. Chores, the same old chores. Beth listened to him go. She made no move to stop him. She was silent, but her lips moved in bitter soundless comments. Easy, was what he was. He would still work for them. They would be renters all their lives.

Retired



ETH PATTERSON came out of his house.

“Put on your rubbers, pa,” his wife called.

“Yeh.”

He bent down stiffly to pick up his overshoes from the porch floor, leaned against the black oilcloth-covered front door, and buckled them on with fumbling movements of his big thick fingers. Little smudges of dry mud showed where they had stood.

His wife called again: “Don’t forget the yeast now. Tell Henry *yeast foam*—not that compressed he sent me last time.”

“Yeh.”

He went slowly down the walk.

Mrs. Lee Atchison, hurrying up behind him, was surprised to see how like an old man he walked: not shuffling, but with a kind of aimlessness, as if he were going nowhere in particular and it didn’t matter whether he ever got there. The big overshoes looked loose on his feet, his shoulders hung under his old greenish overcoat. The white hair in his neck under the worn fur cap looked thin and pathetic.

“Nice day,” Mrs. Atchison cried, tapping briskly past him.

“Yes. Yes,” he said vaguely. He did not really take in who she was until she had passed. Then he muttered: “Alvina Garst—where’s *she* goin’ to in such a hurry?”

Nice day—he looked uneasily at the sky.

The sky was drowned deep in blue. The evergreens in the yard showed dark against it, the bleached boughs of the maple-trees seemed to be drinking it in. Little shining rivers, all current, ran down the cement sidewalk. The grass

on the lawns was burned dry and pale-brown, but was wet and greenish underneath with raw watery places in the little hollows. Snow still formed a dingy crust on the shady side of the brick drug store he was passing.

It all made him say: "Won't be long now till the ground's ready."

He looked anxiously to see who was in town to-day.

There were not many teams. It was too muddy yet for cars, and this warm weather had spoiled the sleighing. That was Flavius Busby's old nag in front of the meat market. The boy must have driven it in. "See he's got the buggy out," Seth thought. The horse, still in its dark shaggy winter coat, lifted its drooping head and looked at him with sad brown eyes.

There were a few farmers on the street—Ed Messenger from north of town, Shumacker the stock-man, he was always gadding round—not many. Frank must not have come in.

The mud was all churned up and wet in the street. Roads must be bad.

First he had to go to Miller's for the yeast.

There were two or three women from the country in the front of the store where the dress goods were. They were young, they wore knitted tam-o'-shanters with big fluffs of yarn on top, like high-school girls. He knew only in a general way who they were. One of them spoke, and he ducked his head vaguely.

He went on to the back of the store. Two men in mackinaws, with their overalls tucked into low reddish rubber boots, were lounging on an oilcloth-covered table where Miller kept fashion sheets and percale aprons. One of them was the husband of the woman who had spoken, one of the Tiedes from out Honey Creek way. The other was a stranger.

"How-do, Seth? What'll you have?" said Miller.

"Oh, put me up a package of yeast, Henry."

"All right."

"She says not that compressed you sent last time."

"Not the compressed. All right."

He leaned on the table with the other two men. One of them was saying: "—but the last fellow that buys is going to get stung somewhere. Now ain't that so? Land can't go up always—can it?" "Well, maybe—" Bert Thomas didn't get stung on that two hundred and thirty acres, I'll say. He got five hundred an acre—" "Aw, come off!" "Well, he's tellin' round he did." "Yeh, he's tellin'!"

They were talking about land changing hands. Seth Patterson listened, at the same time sombre and wistful. Once in a while they appealed to him, but they seemed to be pretty well satisfied to keep the talk between themselves. He couldn't help resenting the fact that the one man was a stranger. He used to know about everyone around here.

"Oh, that new fellow on Cutter's place! Say, what kind of a nationality is he, anyway?"

He got up heavily, went out of the store, only answering gruffly—when Miller called out: "Anything more you wanted, Seth?"—"Nope, that's all."

He wandered down the little business street, two blocks long, with the brick bank building at the head and the yellow-and-brown station beyond.

If he went home, he wouldn't have anything much to do but sit in his rocker near the bay window and look over the *Sheepbreeders' Gazette* again. Wood all chopped and kindling cut, and "she" looked after the chickens.

He drifted into the Post Office—not that there ever was anything. His folks in the East had been the only ones who had ever written much, and they were most of them gone now.

The room smelled damp, and there was fresh mud on the floor. The scent disturbed him, even here, mixed with smells of paper and tobacco smoke. Two blue-striped mail bags for the rural carriers were hunched in a corner. Well, it was handy to be able to stop in for your mail whenever

the trains came in, not wait to have it brought out once a day—

Not even the postmaster, Mellen, was here. Just the girl, his helper. No one to say "Good day."

He opened his box. An implement catalogue again—"Don't know why they keep sendin' these things to me. Better send 'em to Frank."

There was no special need to go home. "She" wasn't in any hurry for the yeast. He eyed the produce house a moment, then wandered in, as he had known he would.

This was where the old fellows in Coreville always congregated. It was a big dingy room littered with slatted poultry boxes with chickens' heads poking through, and with egg cases piled up in the corner. The men had a place by the stove where they sat on a wooden settee and some battered kitchen chairs. There were five of them to-day, all white-haired, all rough and weather-stained like old furniture that has been left out in the weather. Most of them had on woollen caps and old coats and sweaters.

A bar of pale but exciting sunshine fell through the dirty window almost up to their corner.

"Se' down, Seth. Make yourself to home," they called.

He sat down on one of the kitchen chairs close to the coal hod, which had a sprinkling of peanut shells and tobacco among the coal. The place smelled of iron, of poultry and eggs, and wood.

The same talk was going on:

"Well, I don't know now. They's got to come a break some day—land can't keep on a-goin' up for ever." "Hunter done pretty good at his sale, so they tell me." "Zat so? Well, he'd ought to, he's got a pretty good stock." "No, sir, I don't care what these felluhs say, when cholery once gets among hawgs, it's got 'em, now." "Gittin' pretty near plantin'-time, all right." "No, the ground ain't frozen much underneath. The snow's helped to keep it. Been a pretty fair winter all round."

Seth Patterson listened glumly. He didn't feel like talking . . . that moist disturbing smell in the air. He felt crabbed and helpless, sitting here just gassing with the ground getting soft and the sky blue. Uneasy, and somehow lost.

Monty Cokeheimer leaned over and said: "Whut ye goin' to put in that south forty this year, Seth?"

"Don't know," he answered shortly. "Ask Frank what he's going to put."

"Oh, that's the way, is it?" Cokeheimer sniffed what he meant for a laugh through his nose. "Well—we can't be young always. We got to give the young ones a chancet."

Seth grunted. Cokeheimer—he was thin and loose, there was something too eager in his peering red-rimmed eyes. He licked his lips when he heard anything. The men were always taking him down.

"Nope," said Jake Ritchie, lifting his foot and staring at it before he let it down heavily, "we can't all be young."

"No—no—"

"Well, when a man's worked all his life," Sampson said in a raised argumentative voice, "and's done well, he's due to take things a little easy when he's getting along in years."

"Oh, sure."

"Well, the woman likes it in town," said Ritchie. "She's got things a little handier for her than she had 'em on the farm. And she can attend church easier, and all. She ain't so young, you know. Yes, it's more fur the woman I come to town."

"Well, a man don't want to work *all* his life."

The door was opened and a rush of bright clean March air came in. The old fellows sniffed it in.

"Say, this is good March weather."

The sunlight lit up their old frosty faces, their rough hands, and shabby clothes. The youngest Van Patten boy, Dan, was lifting poultry crates from a wagon just outside. They watched him. The sun burnt his hair to gilt, they could see the movements of his strong brown arms lifting up from their blue sleeves.

"Hear he's been shinin' round with that Bohunk girl on Wright's place."

"Oh, I guess that's mostly talk. Dan's a nice young feller. He'll do well."

"Well, sir, this weather looks like plantin'-time." "Oh, we'll have snow yet."

Late in the afternoon Seth Patterson said he must be getting along, and wandered out. The school-children were roller-skating on the walk, he had to look out for them. The sunlight was gone, the blue sky looked hard and cold. His leg ached. He had that queer feeling in his chest again —kind of a weight pressing, he had told Doc Merton. If it kept up, "she" said he ought to go to Rochester.

He took off his overshoes stiffly and carefully on the front porch. He saw how the snow had soaked into the wood, making the porch floor grey and soft. The place needed painting. He opened the storm door that was covered with heavy black oilcloth studded with big bright nails.

The hallway was cold, and the front room that they kept shut off in winter. The front room had their best carpet, an organ, a golden-oak centre table with a knitted doily, chairs of various eras, and their own pictures in silver and red-plush frames. It was stiff, chill, proper. They almost never used it.

He put back the red portières and the folding doors, and went into the sitting-room.

Here he felt better. A good fire showed red through the stove, it made warm lights on the green velvet sofa, and the table, and the light-coloured wall-paper.

With an old man's sound, he let himself down into his big wooden rocker by the bay window. He could look through the lace curtains, past the two scrubby cedar-trees, and see a little piece of the street. He could smell the earth-and-leaf odour of his wife's plants that were set on a window-bench covered with scalloped paper, and on two little white-painted stools. He picked up the *Sheepbreeders' Gazette* and looked it over again.

"Pa, 'dyou get the 'east?"

"Yeh. It's on the table."

The light began to get dim and sad. Little sounds came from the kitchen where "she" was working. "She" found plenty to do—her housework, the chickens, pottering around with her plants, making all kinds of fancy lace. But how could he potter—used to big work, heavy work, in the open? Never had had any time for little pottering things.

He lay back in his chair, in the dim light.

This was the time of year when he began to miss the farm. Of course it was the thing to do, to come into town when you were getting along, and take it a little easy.—Frank was married, it gave him a good start. The farm work had been getting pretty hard. Didn't want to keep on farming all his life.

But getting toward spring—the farm, the red barn smelling of hay, the way the ground sloped to the pasture with low wet places in the path, the long groaning cry of the windmill, and the sound of the breeze in the willow grove at evening—

This was what he had looked forward to and slaved for all his life—to sit in a rocking-chair, with enough in the bank, not to have to work like a horse all day in any weather—take some ease. To live in town, have things a little nicer than on the farm.

If his leg kept on he might be laid up to-morrow—well, 'twouldn't make much difference if he was, if he wanted to stay in bed.

"Frank can't put alfalfa on that forty. It's too wet," he muttered.

Sitting back dully, he felt the queer crushing on his chest. He stared through the window at the dark blurs of the cedar-trees, feeling it, letting it take possession of him.

It seemed to be getting worse.—Well, what if it did? Maybe it would.—When a man's work was over, what was there left to live for, anyway?

A Pilgrim and a Stranger

I

OLD men came day after day to sit out on the green-painted iron benches around the Court House square in Denver—old fellows, left-overs, some bums, some respectable in decent clothes. They sat there talking, about politics and prices. Some had errands in town for their wives or daughters as an excuse for coming. Here and there was a silent young man or a bored solitary stranger.

There were a number of them to-day—a burning blue September day. There were the three old fellows who made a business of coming—the ancient, doddering, one-eyed man, the little, neat, pathetic one with the precise ostentatious speech, and the tall, sour one with the drooping moustache. And another who was often there—a skinny, pitiful old creature with bleared, frosty eyes and frayed greenish clothes. He kept edging up to the others and trying to get in a word. One lonely youth sat apart, with his knees crossed and his green felt hat pulled low over his eyes, staring sombrely at the shops across the street.

People passed in a desultory way along the sun-filled streets. Yellow leaves slid through the air and rattled along the pavement. The old fountain in the square kept a thin silver veil of water between the old men's eyes and its group of tarnished gilded ladies. The sky was blue, bluer than summer. But a little brown was creeping over the pink geraniums and the heliotrope in the flower beds.

The words that the old men spoke were detached, idle,

sounding a long while in the clear warm air. The clang of street-cars sounded, and steps along the pavement.

The one-eyed man said in his toothless, hissing voice:

"I ain't seen the fellow who's staying with his son. Wonder if he's gone back to Ioway."

"He'd be there about one month," the moustached man said, "above the sod."

"A terrible cough," the little man said with satisfaction.

"It's getting better now, though, seems like."

"Aw, getting better. Just one way it'll ever get better."

The ragged man edged up closer. His meagre, frost-bitten nose seemed to point and sniff the air.

"That looks like him coming now. Don't it? Up there?" he said in an eager, furtive way.

They never let him into their discussions, although he always snickered at the jokes and listened avidly to the opinions. He all but nudged the one-eyed man, stealing glances at the eyeless lid that remained calmly, motionlessly closed.

They leaned forward and squinted until they could make out the one they were discussing, from the thin stream of onward-moving people—an old man in a loose black suit and a brown felt hat, with bundles in his arms and leaning on a cane. Immensely tall and thin, so thin that his body seemed hardly able to hold up the great hunched shoulders or to belong to the large shuffling feet.

As he came nearer, his weather-beaten face showed, with eyes of that amazing blue that only old people and little children have.

"Howdy, how-d'-do?" they all called. "Better set down awhile."

He let himself down on a bench, panting and wiping his tired, staring face. A film came over the blue of his eyes. He coughed—the terrible rumbling cough that comes from exposure to the weather. It pulled up his shoulders and hunched him over in a grotesque way. He leaned back and wiped his face with an immense blue bandanna handkerchief. The others were all watching.

"Well, how's the cough?" the little man asked cheerfully.

"Oh—this doctor here seems to think it's better," he said huskily. "I can't see's it is."

"Well, sir," the one-eyed man said, "a cough's a terrible thing to get started. Awful hard to get rid of it once you've got it."

"You find it improved, however, since you came to this climate?" the little man asked.

"I can't see's it is. *They* all try to tell me 'tis," the old man said gloomily. "I can't see's there's so much in this climate as they all let on."

The sour-faced man said with cynical enjoyment:

"Say, zit taken yeh this long to find that out? They's more bad weather here, take it all together, than I ever seen in the State of Indiany, but it's always unus'al. The old settlers ain't never seen anything like it. Psho, it's a lot of bunk to get the money out of 'em," he cried fiercely.

"Oh, now, I can't allow that," the little, neat man expostulated. "It's noted for being a very fine climate. Take my wife—at this time of the year, in Dundee, she would have been wretched with hay fever. But she has been entirely free from it ever since we came out to Colorado, fourteen years this—November, if I recall correctly. Dundee, New York," he explained hastily. "Our former home. I was connected with a bank there."

"I hain't got any kick on the climate," the one-eyed man said. "I'm what they call an old settler here. Been here thirty-five year. I've seen bad weather and I've seen good."

"Oh, yes, it's a very fine climate," the little man said, sedately.

"Far as I can see," the sour old man said, "folks die here the same as they do anywhere else. The graveyards are as well populated here as in any other place." He looked around agonizedly for a place to spit that wasn't against the law.

"We came here for our daughter's health," the little man said with his small pomposness.

"She git well?"

"Oh, yes. Married now. Has a child—a fine little boy, looks very much like his grandfather, according to the general opinion. They do not live here, however. Her husband—"

"I sh'd think you'd hev gone back to New York," the sour man interrupted. "Banking business is a pretty good business."

The little man replied with reserve: "No. No, we preferred to remain here. My wife. She is conducting a business—well, she and I together. She has most of the practical management. She deals in hair goods."

There was silence.

The old man from Iowa moved clumsily—leaned slowly over to pick up a bundle.

"Been making some purchases?" the little man chirped.

"I get a few things now and then for my daughter-'n-law."

He turned his blue eyes mournfully toward the fountain. A few yellow leaves floated on the dark water near the stone rim.

"Well, now, sir, you wouldn't be having weather like this this time of the year in Iowa, I'll warrant."

"It's awful dry. Dry enough to have the corn burnt up," he muttered. He got up, fumbled for his stick and all his bundles. "Well, I suppose she'll be wanting some of these things. Good day to you."

They watched him move slowly off toward the street-car track and stand on the wrong corner.

"He ain't satisfied. He won't stick it out," they said.

The car the old man was waiting for came. He looked at it dazedly as it went past him, then limped as fast as he could to the place where it stopped. He thought—dang it, these cars never did seem to stop twice in the same place! He stepped back to let a haughty henna-haired person in a

georgette frock and a fur sweep past him, then lifted himself painfully on to the step. The conductor stood with his hand impatiently on the bell. The old man swayed uncertainly to a seat as the car started.

He sat there, holding the bundles loosely in his big hands, looking with vacant blue eyes out of the window. The Court House passed—the old fellows on the benches were gone—

But they were a queer lot, anyway.

He always felt a little disappointed and lonely when he tried to talk with them. That little fellow, now—"hair goods"—what kind of a person was he? They all seemed so rootless, so homeless and strange. Now, the fellows that hung around the restaurant and Grawe's store at home—he knew the name and family of every one, just what he did and where he belonged. They were satisfactory and real. But these men—they made him feel unreal himself, as if he were just in the air with nothing to tie to. Not a one of them would care if they never saw him again.

He coughed.

"It ain't any better," he thought, with pleased pessimism.

Still, he knew that his chest hurt less than at home. And it was true that he hadn't been able to go about this way for the last six months. But he wasn't going to admit it to any of them.

A gap in the buildings showed the chain of mountains, dim blue with faint streaks of silver. He looked dispassionately at them. He thought: "I'd give the lot of them for a real cornfield."

Those fellows down there—he didn't believe there was one of them who would know a real ear of corn when he saw it.

The corn would be ripe "back home" by now. They would be cutting and shocking and filling silo. He had never missed out on it the way he was doing now. It didn't seem like fall.

The car turned away from the mountains and went slid-

ing easily down long curving streets, between old-fashioned brick houses, and new bungalows showing bright through the glitter of cottonwood leaves and the cloudy yellow-green of silver maples. No red in the autumn here—sumach or woodbine or hard maples. It was all yellow and shining and light.

He kept watching for the little brick Episcopal church—saw it and got out at the right corner this time.

He had two blocks to go to his son's house. He limped along drearily. He glanced wistfully toward the shining windows of the corner drug store, but "the fellow in there," to whom he talked sometimes, who came from White Oak, only sixteen miles from home, was busy. How queer and lonely it was not to have anyone call out: "H'lo, Enos." "Good day, Mr. Bush." "Well, what kind of weather are we going to have?"

He came to the house, a pretty bungalow of frescoed brick, with a sun parlour, and with red geraniums and ferny things showing in the green porch boxes. The little terraced lawn was littered over with yellow leaves from the silver-maple-tree. The old man's heart lightened. Here was something he could do. He could rake the leaves.

He went on to the porch that was deep and cool and half hidden by the vines that were turning brown. The low wicker chairs were empty. They rocked a little, lightly, in the breeze.

The door was locked but the key was in the mail box. He went into the house that had a motionless cool feeling of emptiness.

He tiptoed guiltily. They must have gone somewhere. It gave him a feeling of relief.

He took the bundles out to the fresh sunny kitchen. There were small casement windows above the sink. Through them he could see leaves drifting. A dish of red apples stood on the cupboard ledge.

He looked about, feeling guilty again, not because "she" would care, but because he was all alone in the house. He

said: "Oh, pshaw!" and took one. He sat down in the small white-enamelled chair by the kitchen table, but it was too little and too flimsy for him. He went into the living-room and sank into the great tapestry-covered easy-chair by the empty brick fire-place. He ate his apple noisily and at ease. It was cool and shadowy by the fire-place—the cool of bricks and cement. But sunlight came in through the western windows.

As soon as he had got his apple eaten he would go out and rake up those leaves. Get it done before any of them came home to protest and tell him he ought to be resting.

He threw the core into the cavern of the fire-place and poked it away in where it couldn't be seen. It was a good apple—but not like the little russets on the tree back of the house at home. It wasn't the same to eat an apple out of a dish as to pick it off the ground, warm with sun, and brush off the dry shreds of grass sticking to it, and eat it out there under the trees where it didn't matter what a fellow did with the core. But it was a good apple. He could have got away with one or two just like it.

Now things didn't seem so bad. The doctor had told him he'd have to stick it out here if he wanted to last out the winter—and then no telling how long he might live. Maybe he could. Harry had things nice here, all right. He had done pretty well for a boy just off the farm . . . and the way he'd put himself through college and all.

It was a nice enough little place that Harry had. Maybe there'd be other jobs this fall even if the garden was about the size of a girl's handkerchief and if Eleanor took care of the flowers. He felt quite rejuvenated with the prospect of the leaves—although he had a sad wonder as to who would rake them in the old yard this fall, a vision of them drifted up into a corner of the fence. Yet even last fall it had been all that he could do to clean up the place. He wouldn't have lasted much longer there, that was the truth.

He went to the door. The lawn looked very clean beside the walk. He saw a bicycle leaning against the terrace,

and then he saw the red-haired boy who cut the grass and cleaned the ash-pit come busily along with the rake—already at it.

He went in and sat down again. He knew that it was for his own sake that they would not let him do anything—but this made him all the more resentful. They were so afraid—so afraid he might do a little—their watchfulness and their fussing filled him with stubborn helpless wrath. The anger which he felt for his disease he transferred to them. Always watching him. Always looking after him. Telling him not to do this and not to do that.

He fell into a black pit of home-sickness. All he could think of was Golden Prairie, the little town with the black roads between the big trees, the restaurant with the bench in front of it, the house on the edge of town where he and "ma" had been living ever since they had moved in and left the farm to Jos—the old white house and how it would be looking now, with the yellow seed corn hung up in the porch to dry and the gourds on the rail, ripening, the hard maple out by the walk just turning, the brown leaves and apples under the russet tree, the grape-vines along the back fence—those were the things that made fall. Maybe it wasn't such nice weather there, as that old fellow had said. Maybe the sky and the woods were grey, and rain was lashing the last leaves off the trees, water was standing in black puddles in the road, blackbirds were whirling up crying from the sodden cornfields. . . . It was what he wanted. It was home. He breathed hard and twisted in his seat.

Something desperate and inarticulate grew in him. He couldn't stand it. He had to get back. Somehow—anyhow. No matter what happened. Here he was not himself. Was this living?

There was a flutter and rustle and sound of voices on the porch. They had come back—"the womenfolks."

"Oh, father's here—the key's out of the box," he heard Eleanor say gaily. He kept on sitting by the fire-place, staring and glum.

They came in hurried and talkative, Eleanor fragrant and rustling in modish silks, "ma" a little excited in her best black taffeta.

"Oh, here you are, father! You got home before we did," Eleanor cried. She hurried on with a faint, pleasant swish of silks. "I'll just take off my hat, mother."

The old lady said in explanation: "I didn't know we'd be gone so long. She wanted me to go to some club with her. A woman spoke. It was real nice."

The old man did not answer. She glanced at him uncertainly. She said:

"Ain't you feeling good, pa?"

"I'm feeling all right."

"I bet you walked too far in town."

Then she said with a sigh: "Well, I better change my things and help her with the supper. I didn't know we'd be so late. You set still now and don't try to do so much."

"Yes, do so much!" he muttered bitterly to himself.

The old lady hurried into her percale house-dress and went out into the kitchen, where Eleanor, in a big crisp apron, was already at work, humming as she moved about.

"Can't I do some of that?" she asked anxiously.

"Oh, you don't need to help, mother! I wish you'd sit down in the living-room and make yourself comfy. I thought you looked very tired this afternoon."

"I get kinda drowsy, seems like, listening to folks talk," she said in apology. "Here now—I can cut up them apples, anyway."

"Well—if you *won't* rest." Eleanor gave up the apple dish and the little sharp knife with a pretty smile.

Then she said, carefully impersonal:

"I usually cut them rather fine, mother. For salad, you know. I like them so, don't you? . . . And then if you'll just mix these nuts with them and arrange them, just a

spoonful or so each, on these lettuce leaves. . . . Thanks, dear."

The old lady worked with painstaking care. All of Eleanor's things were so nice and she was so particular. The old lady had an uneasy feeling that she never did things to suit Eleanor, although Eleanor was always so sweet, it was hard to tell. But it made her awkward and uncertain—as if she hadn't been keeping house for forty years!

"Father seemed so tired," Eleanor said sympathetically. "I wonder if there's anything I can do for him."

"Oh, no, you don't need to bother with him, he'll sit still," the old lady said hastily.

"I feel guilty about the errands. But he seems so anxious to go."

"He won't give up that he can't walk just the same as he used to. He's always doing himself out."

"Perhaps he'll lie down until dinner."

"Well—he don't like to lie down very well."

She went into the living-room, where the old man sat sunken into the big chair so that only his hands and the wasted bony lines of his profile showed. She stood and looked at him, then she said expressionlessly:

"How do you feel, pa?"

"Feel good enough."

"She thought maybe you'd like to lie down until supper time."

He grunted. Finally he said:

"I tell you I ain't a-going to keep on like this much longer."

She waited.

"I'm either going home or I'm going to hire out somewhere."

"Pshaw, what makes you talk like that? You know you ain't able to do any such thing."

"I know I ain't able——"

"Sh! She'll hear you," she whispered agonizedly. She

nodded toward the kitchen. "Come on into the bedroom if you want to talk. Come on, now."

He pulled himself up panting and creaked unwillingly after her.

4

In the bedroom they sat down together on the modern four-poster and talked in loud, cautious whispers, the old lady glancing anxiously at the door and saying: "Sh! Look out now, pa—"

"Here there ain't a thing to do nor a one to talk to."

"You go down town every day. You're gone most of the time, seems to me."

"Yes, and what's a few errands down town?"

"You can't do much more at home, can you?"

He glared at her. They kept arguing back and forth, out of principle on the old lady's part, for she sympathized with his anxiety to be at home. She, too, thought "they had been here long enough," "it was time to be getting back." And she sympathized with his disinclination to obey the doctor. She wanted to be back, too, although it was nice to have a change, to be with Harry, and to see how Eleanor did things. She would go back to Golden Prairie with something to talk about for weeks, and with all sorts of new ideas. Already their trunk was half full of little new "rinctums" and housekeeping devices she had purchased in the ten-cent store—cleaning-fluids, miraculous soaps, a "mystic mit." But she was getting anxious to be back with her chickens and her plants and her own house. As for "pa," she thought of what the doctor had said with mingled fatalism and disbelief. She would have thought it foolish to pay too much attention to it. She understood very well how he felt, although of course she would not admit it immediately.

"But it helps you here."

"Helped me a lot, ain't it?"

"Yes, and you know it has. You know what the doctor said yesterday."

"Hmp!"

"Well, he'd oughta know if anyone had, hadn't he? We pay him enough. You know yourself your cough's better. And if you could be content to set still——"

"Yes, content to set still! What's the use of living setting still?"

"You couldn't go around this way at home. You'd set still there because you'd have to."

He turned on her fiercely. "Well, I'm going home. You can stay here if you're so set on it, but I'm going."

"I didn't say I was so set on it."

"Seems like you are, the way you keep us here."

"Well, pa, it's for your own good. . . . What will Harry think?"

They kept on wrangling, the old lady composed and unanswerable, the old man fierce, stubborn and inarticulate.

"Well, get off this nice spread," she said at last. "You don't need to rumple it all up."

"You're setting on it, too."

"Yes, but I'm careful how I'm setting. . . . Listen, now! Harry's home. You don't want to have him hear you talking this way with all he's done for you."

He grumbled into miserable silence.

Harry called: "Hello, the house!"

They heard Eleanor answer gaily: "Hello!"

"There now, you be quiet," the old lady whispered. "They'll be having supper in a minute."

"I don't want any supper."

"Yes, you do, too, want some supper."

He leaned back, exhausted and pale, wiping the moisture from his forehead. She watched him inexorably.

"You lie down until then, and then you come in to supper."

She pulled back the spread and he lay down, weary but stubborn and desperate.

“Father! Mother! Coming?” Harry called.

“Yes, we’re coming,” she answered hastily.

She gave the old man a look and hurried out.

They were already in the dining-room. Harry pulled back her chair and seated her.

“Where’s father?”

“He’ll be here in a minute.”

“Perhaps he’d rather not get up for dinner,” Eleanor said.

“Oh, yes, of course he’ll get up.”

“Isn’t father so well, mother?”

“He’s just resting,” she answered evasively. “No, you set still, Harry. I’ll call him.”

She opened the bedroom door.

“Pa!” she whispered warningly.

“Whadda you want?”

“Come on now. They’ve all set down to the table. They’re all waiting for you.”

He dragged himself up and followed her out.

5

At the table the two old people did not show by a look or a gesture what they had been discussing. They were subdued and guarded. Their eyes had a veiled look. They were not even easy with Harry any more. There seemed to be no connexion between them and him—a pleasant, thin, brown-haired young business man—except his careful, almost worried, attention to them. They had never, since they had first come in the spring, dreamed of intruding even their interests upon him.

The old man ate cautiously, almost furtively. The old lady warned him with a look or a whisper when he was doing anything that she considered amiss—when he gulped his tea too noisily or reached over too far to spear a piece

of bread from the silver dish. He always complained that she wouldn't let him eat and made him go away hungry; and she eked out these unsatisfactory meals with little furtive gifts of apple, bread and cake.

Everything was good, but it was not their kind of food or their way of doing. Things seemed elaborate to them. Eleanor was so nice and cheerful and all, but there did seem to be a little something elaborate about all that she did. They admired her, and had always praised her in Golden Prairie, but they were not themselves with her. She made them uneasy—her broad, cheerful, composed face, her firm, small mouth and chin, her light, modishly waved hair, her pretty, cool, blue eyes, her small capable hands. She was so competent. They could not think of her as belonging in any way to them. She awed them, and yet they resented her a little.

The old man could not eat much to-night, and after the meal he submitted to going into his room and lying down again. He was in the force of a great resolution. They could feel it. His wife went with him, and Harry followed Eleanor into the kitchen.

"Father didn't look very well to-night," he said anxiously.

Eleanor did not answer at once. Then she turned to him with pretty concern showing in her blue eyes and the lines of her broad, creamy forehead.

"I'm so afraid he walked too far to-day, Harry. He did some little errands for me—but he always seems so anxious to do them. In fact, it was really more for his sake—"

"I know. He misses all the little jobs he's accustomed to doing around the place," Harry said comprehendingly. "I wish there were more things we could give him to do."

"But, Harry, he really isn't able. Dr. Greiner says he must rest. If he would only understand that, somehow—"

"I know." He stood with his hands in his pockets, musing, seeing in his remembrance what he could not hope to make Eleanor see—the old house, the farm where his

brother Jos was now living, and his father as he had been in the old days, a great, tall, strong-shouldered, strong-armed farmer in his blue overalls and boots—"Enos Bush" to everybody, and liked and greeted by the whole town. Of course he was discontented sitting unknown and useless, in an arm-chair in his son's house, miles from home. Harry's pitiful comprehension dragged against his desire to make the old man stay, to make him be "sensible."

"I guess I'll look in and see how he's making it," he said.

As he went into the living-room he met his mother coming hurriedly out of the bedroom door. He would not give her time to hide the anxious expression of her face, but said:

"How's father feeling, mother?"

"He's all right."

"Is he resting?"

"I guess so."

"Eleanor was afraid he might have walked too far this afternoon."

"He always walks too far. He never knows when he ought to stop."

"I wish we could think of some way to make him more contented, mother," he suggested cannily.

"Yes." Her eyes went guiltily from his face.

"Sit down, mother—"

"I want to go and help with the dishes."

"Never mind the dishes. Eleanor's just stacking them. Her cleaning woman's coming in the morning."

She sat down ill at ease and rocked hard, stealing glances at her son's face and looking as if she wanted to say something. If she had to say it, it was more easily said while they were alone. She began in a thin, expressionless voice:

"Pa thinks we ought to start for home next week, Harry."

"For home!"

She nodded, not looking at him.

"But, mother, that's madness. You know it is."

She acquiesced faintly. The veiled look was over her

eyes again, baffling him. She kept on rocking, with tight lips and folded hands. He looked helplessly at her.

"But, mother, we can't let him. You know that. You know what it would mean."

"He's a good deal better," she said.

"Yes, while he's here——"

"Well—that's what he's made up his mind to."

"But you aren't going to give in to him. You're going to help us keep him here."

She kept on rocking.

He gave an exclamation. He had not dreamed that it had really come to this, although he had felt the old man's discontent. Now he got up excitedly. Didn't she know? Couldn't she understand? That if the old man went back he would be going straight to his death! She would not look at him.

He went into the bedroom. His father was sitting, disconsolate but stubborn, on the edge of the bed. The new travelling-bag that he had bought to bring out to Denver was open on the rug, and into it he had already put his socks and neckties. Harry stood, troubled and protesting, at the foot of the bed. The old lady came in and sat down in the little mahogany rocker. She had had her say. She sat now silent and non-committal, and let "the men-folks" talk.

Harry began lightly and cheerfully: "Look here, father. You don't really think of leaving us."

The old man looked down at his gaunt, knotted hands.

"Why, who would do Eleanor's errands?"

"Oh—I guess what I do don't amount to much."

Harry allowed his trouble to show in his thin, pleasant face and brown eyes.

"Why, father, you can't really think of going. Not when you're doing so well. A few months more and we'll have you well."

The old man's silence goaded him.

"Father, it's madness. It would be signing your own death warrant. You and mother both know that. You couldn't stand that long, hard winter. In that house way at the edge of the town—no sidewalks—stoves—"

His father stared gloomily at his big square-toed shoes planted incongruously on the little round blue-and-white rug. "I've stayed a good while. I ain't much use here," he muttered.

"But, father, what could you do *there*?"

He sat stubborn and dumb. He had no arguments, except the one vital one that he could not put into words—the fierceness, the madness of his longing for home. He wanted the old house, the barn, the trees, the long walk "down town," the familiar stores, the cornfields, the ways and the people. He knew what the winter would mean, in a kind of way he knew it. But he had to go.

The old lady rocked silently.

Harry gave an exasperated exclamation. Surely somehow he could make them see, could stop them—but it was like beating against a stone wall. It was like murder to let them go—but what could you do? He suddenly made a gesture and left the room.

He went out to the porch, where Eleanor sat rocking softly in one of the low wicker chairs. The very air was different here than in the bedroom which the two old people had somehow filled with an alien atmosphere. This quiet roomy place, with the pretty chairs, the magazines rustling slightly on the wicker table, the faint fresh scent from the porch boxes—this was home. He dropped down beside Eleanor with a sigh of relief in the midst of his anxiety. She waited, sympathetic but collected, for him to speak.

He told her about it. "I'm afraid he's going for all I can say. He's been away just as long as he can stand it. It's terrible. I can't bear to think of him in that barn of a place. But it's as if he were possessed. It's so foolish, so utterly useless—"

Eleanor was sympathetically silent. She leaned over and picked up some flower petals that had fallen upon the floor and carefully threw them over the rail of the porch.

"But don't you think if you can make him understand—"

"Make him understand! No power on earth can make him understand."

"It's too bad, dear," she said, a little withdrawn. "Perhaps the doctor can persuade him."

"Perhaps."

He could not make her see how utterly bull-headed, how impervious to reason, his father was when he got started. Now he gave it up. He clasped his knee and looked out across the street, where a moon of smoked pearl was half veiled by a cloud of dusky violet, above the red-tiled roof of the Italianesque house across the way. He sighed, but settled deeper into his chair and relaxed in the familiar quiet of the porch.

The old man saw the moon, too, as he stood half-dressed by the unlighted bedroom window. It had an alien look above the unfamiliar lines of the Italian roof. Now that he had withstood them all and got his way, a kind of weight of sad wonder lay on his heart. But at sight of the moon a mournful exultation welled up. A few more nights and it would be his own moon again—above the oak-tree in the pasture across from the old house at home.

A Rural Community

HE station agent at Walnut, and Mrs. Jake Dietz, who was expecting her brother's wife from Pomeroy, could not place the man who got off the "Clipper" at 10:10. He did not look just like a travelling man. He was stocky, moved very briskly, had a slight moustache, wore a grey suit and a travelling-cap, and carried a bag pasted over with labels which Mrs. Dietz could not make out. She did not hear him ask the station agent where Luke Hockaday lived, or it would have come to her who he must be—that Ralph Chapin whom Luke Hockaday had "raised" and who was now a writer of some kind. But she was busy greeting her brother's wife and saying: "Well, you *got* here."

Ralph Chapin looked alertly about him, at the yellow-and-brown depot with the row of willow-trees and the pastures beyond, at the one small business street and the dingy brick Opera House and Masonic Hall. He thought: "*That* was here—*that* wasn't." The sharp white steeple of the little old Congregational church where he had suffered every Sunday through one of Mr. Soper's half-hour prayers, no longer rose from the maple-trees beyond the Opera House. It had burned, he remembered, and now there was a modern building of pressed brick with a square English tower. He noticed that the little street "across the tracks," where the old hotel and livery barn stood, was falling into decay. One old man sat out in the Windsor chair in front of the empty livery stable. Two or three automobiles passed. They were putting up two new pebble-dash bunga-

lows on what used to be a vacant lot filled with red clover. Changes—even here! You couldn't escape them.

The station agent had told him that Luke Hockaday's was just at the edge of town—"Well, you know where the old Wood place is? Well, d'you know where Art Penhollow's pasture is—where the dump is? Well, d'you know where the *cemetery* is? Well, right across from that, where the road turns." He thought that he could find it. This was the first time that he had been in Walnut since Luke Hockaday had moved into town; it must be fifteen years or more.

He went along a street that had a sidewalk only part of the way. It was "across the tracks" in the old part of town. The first thing that he had noticed when the train pulled out was the stillness everywhere—only twitterings of birds and an occasional trill of song from a fence or tree. His mind, still filled with the rumblings and shriekings of cities, could hardly take it in. Was everyone asleep? As he looked down the street, it pleased him to fancy that the whole town had fallen asleep, like the Sleeping Beauty's castle, and was waiting for him to come back to waken it. Because this street had scarcely changed at all. It was almost the same!

He had been prepared for change. Flying about all over the civilized world as he did, change was the only thing he saw. His mind was full of a world rocking and falling and transforming itself into something undreamed of before—of new inventions, changing empires, a tottering social order, revolution. He had expected hardly to recognize the little old town. When he had come through Edinburgh, the county seat, where he and the Hockaday boys used to drive with their girls on County Fair day and the Fourth of July, he had seen it transformed from a country town into a miniature modern city. His eye had noticed at once the fine brick bank, the asphalt, the new cement bridge over the river. What he had not been prepared for was to find anything the same. He had not permitted himself to expect it. But of course Walnut was slow. It was a country

community, made up almost wholly of retired farmers, and they either of English birth or English descent. It had always had something quaint and rustic about it. Besides, all hill and timber countries were behind the times; and Walnut was just at the edge of that patch of rocky wooded country in the north-eastern corner of Iowa.

He looked from side to side—eager to recognize old landmarks, half amused when he discovered them, yet feeling all the time a tinge of sadness that was like the haunting of melancholy in this exquisite autumn day. This was the very street along which they used to drive when they came into town with a load or on Saturday nights. A wagon came along now—rattling slowly, an old man with a thick white beard hunched over on the seat, a bushel basket of apples and some gunny sacks full of nuts jolting about in the back. That—everything he saw—teased him with elusive memories. This old house had always stood here—a one-story house of dingy brick, plain, with square small-paned windows, an old-timer. That big oak-tree at the corner! Here were vague reminders of the old days—plain white houses with almost a New England air, fallen leaves half raked upon the lawns, some late petunias bordering white house walls, a rockery, a bed of pansies and withered sweet alyssum edged with white clam-shells from the Mississippi. Rope swings from the boughs of elm-trees, a boy with bare feet who stared after him, pumps with tin cups dangling, even one of those queer old hammocks made of slats! It was like going back into his past, in a kind of dream. There were memories that he could almost touch—but not quite—

He looked beyond the houses, at the line of low hills on the south. He stood still—almost caught his breath at the sudden stab of emotion. With a strange impulse he took off his cap, held it crushed in his hand. There they were still—the old eternal hills! How well he knew them, better than anything in the world. The “lay of the land”—something in that to stir the deepest feeling in a man. Low roll-

ing hills, fold after fold, smooth brown and autumnal, some ploughed to soft earth-colour, some set with corn stalks of pale tarnished gold. Along the farther ones, the woods lay like a coloured cloud, brown, russet, red and purple-tinged. As he walked on, the houses grew fewer, everything dwindled into pasture land. The feeling of autumn grew more poignant. There was a scent of dust in the stubble. The trees grew in scattered russet groups. One slender young cottonwood, yellow as a goldfinch and as lyric in its quality, stood in a meadow, alone. Not even spring beauty was so aching and so transient—like music fading away. Yet, under everything, something abiding and eternal.

He came to the very edge of town, almost to the woods through which Honey Creek ran. A house stood at the turn of the road. Of all things he had seen, it was the most autumnal. It stood plain and white against the depths of blue sky. Its trees were turning to pale yellow, its yard scattered with dry leaves. On the back porch yellow seed corn hung by the bleached husks to dry. Hickory nuts and walnuts were spread out on a piece of rag carpet. On the fence posts, orange pumpkins were set in blue granite kettles to ripen. The corn in the small field was in the shock. The smell of apples came from somewhere.

“This must be where they live!” He was sure of it, would have known it if he had not seen the dump across the road in the hollow, if he had not caught sight of the black wrought-iron fence of the cemetery and the white tombstones among the sombre evergreens.

He went up to it, past the shed and a chicken house, to the side gate. He walked quickly, with a smile of anticipation in his eyes and ready to come out upon his lips. An old man was just coming out of the barn along the two planks to the back door. He was big but crippled with rheumatism. He wore a blue shirt, a vest with a brown sateen back, and grey woollen socks. He had a handsome old face that must have been romantic in its youth, with a wave of snow-white hair, a high colour, a big white mous-

tache and small brown eyes. He regarded the stranger with the wariness of a country man. It was Luke Hockaday.

"Well, father—good day to you!" Ralph Chapin called. His teeth glittered under his small light moustache. He held out his hand.

The old man took it doubtfully.

"Don't you know me? Don't you know Ralph?"

Luke Hockaday leaned forward and stared at him. "Well, I believe it is! It's Ralph, for a fact. Ma, come here!"

An old woman came to the door whom, in spite of all the years' change, Ralph Chapin knew for the woman he had called mother. "Who's this, ma?" the old man said. She looked at one and then the other, as if she feared some kind of trap. Recognition began to dawn slowly in her face as the man kept on smiling at her. "It's Ralph! Sure it is!" They all laughed exultantly. She held out her arms. He came into them and stood there a long moment patting her stooped back and trying to swallow down any tears before they should come up and dim his eyes.

He had never dreamed that he would be so moved—or that they still cared so much after all these years. He knew that this would be one of those moments that would always stay with him—with these two old people here, the white house and the blue sky, the light autumn rustling of the trees, the scent of dust and apples.

They went into the house all talking. Luke carried Ralph's bag into the bedroom, and the old lady took his cap from him and laid it carefully upon the white bedspread. All the time, Ralph was telling them in his rapid easy practised way, in his slightly harsh but attractive voice, the circumstances of his coming, and they were repeating and explaining what he said to each other. "Why, yes, didn't ye hear what he just got done saying, ma?" "That's just what he's been trying to tell you, pa, if you'd ever listen." But as he kept glancing about with his swift

trained observation, he was feeling a sense of disappointment.

It was strange, wrong somehow, to have them here. After all, nothing remained the same in this world, in spite of the deep familiarity of those hills. They ought to have been in the parlour of the old farm-house that he remembered so well. It was one of those rock houses that are still found here and there near the Mississippi. It had deep windows, a wainscoting painted light brown, and beside the door a cupboard like the wainscoting. Whenever he thought of it, he could see Mother Hockaday opening that cupboard where she kept her glasses, toothpicks, her few letters, and a striped paper bag of cinnamon sticks in a tall glass. And he could fancy himself—he must have done it some time—standing in the yard where some yellow snap-dragons sent from England had run wild, in the sunshine, looking at the deep woods across the road.

He sat back smiling at the two old people while they went over and over the circumstances of the meeting. "Why, I didn't know no more who 'twas when I seen him opening that gate," Father Hockaday said. "Says he: 'Good day to ye, father.' Well, I knew 'twasn't any of the boys, but I couldn't figure out who't could be, then. Then says he: 'Don't ye know Ralph?' Ralph—well, I see that's who 'twas." "I knew him right off. Sure I did," the old lady declared. "No, ma, you didn't know him no more'n I did." "Sure I did." Ralph laughed delightedly. Suddenly he recognized their old familiar way of speech and he was at home again. Mother Hockaday's reassuring "Sure," and old Luke so slow, so deliberate, with a flavour of rural England in his tone. It was the way that he remembered old Grandma and Grandpa Hockaday talking, except that they had been completely English. In its different way it struck a note of memory as deep as that which the sight of the hills had touched—but homely, intimate, that brought a smile to his lips. Again it moved him, and astonished him.

"Why, do I look so much the same, mother?" he asked rallyingly. He did not think that he did.

"Sure you do," she replied. "Oh, you dress different and talk different and got that little *mustache*, but then your voice is just the same, and the way you look out of your eyes—I'd know ye anywhere. That quick way, taking a body right up on everything. The rest of the boys was always more slow, like pa and me. Sure."

He laughed, but he was not exactly pleased. He thought himself entirely transformed from that little raw country boy. He had studied, worked, travelled. He had thought there was not a trace of his old self left. He had been feeling all the time how remote he was from them, what a long way he had come. He had been an orphan whom Luke and Sarah Hockaday had "taken to raise." They were the only parents he had ever known. They had been kind to him, but they had boys and girls of their own and he had always remembered that after all he was not one of theirs. That was partly what had sent him out into the world while the rest had stayed close to the old home, that and his eager restless temperament. He had lived with them on the farm until he was sixteen, when he had gone to work his way through a little Methodist academy a few stations away at Wesley, and then through the State University. Then he had gone into newspaper work in Chicago, and just once, at the time of Jack Hockaday's wedding, he had come back to the farm. He always wrote to the two old people on Christmas Day and sent them a cheque. Now he was a writer, doing special articles for the big dailies and the magazines. He had been to half the cities of the globe, was in touch with all that was going on in the world, with every "movement." He was just back from a flying trip to the capitals of the new Middle European states, where he had interviewed the leaders of numberless political factions. Before that he had investigated the steel question, and before that had been a special correspondent at the war

and the Peace Conference. He was going on now to do an article for *Hunter's* on "Our New South." His life was a series of flashing journeys, a kind of animated weekly. He thought of himself as a man without a home, or rather as a man capable of making a home in any café where he might chance to find a cosy seat. But somehow, after being so long in far-off countries, through such dangers, and after an illness that he had had in Prague, something had urged him to see this little town again and the two old people whom he had always called mother and father. A sudden realization had come that they would not be here for ever. He had come on from Chicago before he went South. It was not far. He might have come long ago.

But now as he said: "Now, mother, sit back and let *me* take a look at *you*," he could see that she was not so different, after all. At once she began to look familiar to him. She had not changed so much as simply aged. That small head of hers, with something peculiarly sweet even in the cut of the features and structure of the bones, with the eyes set in deep hollows, and the hair of yellowed silver parted in the middle and rippling across the low square forehead. Only, the face was wrinkled, and the loss of teeth had spoiled the sweet curves of the thin lips, had brought up the little chin and sunk in the mouth. But, most certainly, still Mother Hockaday, and the Sarah Wood whose picture, with curls and a feather, he and May used to admire so in the old album.

She looked at him timidly. "I'm an old woman, Ralph." She had always been proud of her pretty face.

"Pshaw, mother, not so old. Still that same pretty curly hair."

"Oh, but just see how white it is, Ralph. Not so white as pa's is, though, even now."

"No, but I got my teeth. Ma's lost hers."

"Yes, and losing teeth ages a body awful. Oh, we're both getting old, pa and me. But then it's natural for folks to get old. They all have to. Sure they do."

"We all follow the same path. The path of life," the old man said impressively.

Ralph stirred slightly. His brows arched a little. He wondered if Luke was still such a devout old codger, and smiled to himself.

But the conversation did not become emotional, after all, as he had half comically feared, remembering Luke's way. Luke Hockaday was a combination of close canny farmer, generous neighbour, and devout churchman, absorbed in his family relations, of an almost profound simplicity. He loved to talk over the ways of God and the lives of his children. His small brown eyes would moisten. But now the old lady gave him no chance. She made little signs to him, to which he answered: "What ye want, anyway, ma?" and finally she contrived to let him know that he was to kill a chicken and to go to town for her. He put on his wide-brimmed black felt hat, and Ralph, smiling to himself, watched him go hobbling off obediently, staring at the piece of yellow paper on which were written all the things which he was to buy in town and half of which he would come back without, even so. They were going to kill the fatted calf.

"Well, now, Ralph, I'll leave ye to yourself a bit," Mother Hockaday said a little formally. "But just make yourself at home. You *are* at home. Sure you are!"

She was going out to the kitchen. "But can't I come out with you, mother?" he asked lightly. "Tie an apron on me and set me to work. It isn't every day you have a big boy to run errands for you."

She looked horrified. He remembered now that no male Hockaday had ever invaded the kitchen except to fill the wood box and empty the slops. That was the English of it. "Oh, no, my dear. I wouldn't have you coming out there to work. I'm used to gettin' the meals, you know. Sit down and read, or walk around the place. *You* know what ye likes to do best. I'll just get us a little something to eat. 'Twon't be much, not in any style like ye gets in it in the cities—"

"No, I'm sure it *won't* be as I get it in the cities," he interrupted. "Not if father carries out his designs on that chicken."

"We ain't got many good fries now," she said apologetically. "Pa, he thought the chickens was too much for me. Addie—that's Jack's wife—has got a hundred and fifty young fries—think of that, Ralph! My, it's nice when they all comes clucking around you when ye goes out with the feed! I likes chickens. I misses what I had on the farm.—Make yourself at home, now, Ralph. If there's anything ye'd like and ye don't see, *ask* me for it. Sure. That's what ye want to do."

She went into the kitchen and he looked after her, smiling fondly.

Left to himself, he wandered softly about a little at first, as one does in a strange house, touching this and that, glancing at the pictures and at the plants in the front window. Then he sat down by the table and picked up a paper that lay there. *The Home Friend!* He threw back his head and laughed noiselessly. To think they were still taking that—a ridiculous old sheet with farm items and blood-and-thunder serials that they had subscribed for, God knows why, as long as he could remember. He could see Mother Hockaday putting on her glasses, sitting down by the lamp on the dining-room table, while the June bugs beat against the ceiling, and saying: "Now, Jack" (or "May," or "Dollie," or "Eddie"), "can't ye go away awhile and quit pestering and let ma read *The Home Friend?*" And they never could. He did not believe the poor woman had ever yet finished a serial! He looked down on the lower shelf for more plunder. The stereoscope! Verily, it was. With the very same views—Westminster Abbey, Mont Blanc, Unter den Linden, the Paris Opera House, the Arnold Arboretum, Forest Hills, Massachusetts, with the azaleas tinted a hideous pink and the leaves a ghastly green. The old album, too, with the dark leather covers stamped with

gold. But he was too restless to look at that now, at all the pictures of Hockadays and Woods and "brother's wife's folks" and "cousins in York State." He wandered about noiselessly on an exploring expedition into the past, everything bringing up memories, acutely familiar, homely, humorous, yet always with that little ache of sadness. The combination desk and bookcase (a new acquisition, evidently, when they had moved into town), but on every shelf a doily, and on the doilies Mother Hockaday's treasures—coloured sand in a glass arranged in the form of a wreath of flowers from the "Picture Rocks" by the Mississippi, a blue plate and tea-pot from England, a pink shell, some grey Spanish moss the Ed Woods had sent up from Florida, an agate—oh, all those things! And on top of the bookcase the stuffed owl that Uncle Pete Hockaday had shot in the timber. A photograph, of the year 1902, pasted on a grey card—a family reunion at the farm. He could make most of them out in the group standing awkwardly in front of the old rock house—mother, father, May and Dollie in those hideous collars and berthas and crimps, Jack, Ed, Will, and their wives, numerous children held firmly in front of parents, Uncle Ben Hockaday in his suspenders. And there were other pictures—Grandpa and Grandma Hockaday framed in black walnut, Dollie at four with bangs and fair hanging hair and striped stockings, Jack's and Addie's wedding picture, Ed's and Girlie's wedding picture (Ed had curled his moustache on the curling-iron!), Dollie's and Fred's wedding picture, Dollie in her "graduation dress," holding a rolled diploma, the class of 1898, "Walnut H. S.," grandchildren, their graduation and wedding pictures—if time didn't fly! And yet what a tremendous sense of continuation—that first old couple and a child, and then another couple and another child, and another couple and another child, and another couple—nothing new, after all, but endless, slightly varied repetitions. The same baby features appeared over and over again. He was completely absorbed

when Mother Hockaday called to him from the door: "Ralph, would ye like to wash your hands before we set down?"

He jumped.

"What ye found there? Oh, photographs!" And as he stood smiling blinking a little as if he had come out of a dream, she went on gravely to point out and explain each one: "That's Dollie's and Fred's girl Bernadine. I guess ye never seen her. That's Uncle Ben Hockaday's son's wife's sister—she's married now. That's May's youngest boy"—until Father Hockaday called out: "Ma, are ye goin' to let all the victuals get cold?"

He followed her out to the dining-room. As they sat down he noted the large window full of plants, and saw that although the table and chairs were not those they had used on the farm, he remembered many of the dishes and the starched white company table-cloth. He remembered that awkward moment when they first sat down and did not know whether to start eating or to bow their heads, until Father Hockaday began in his slow devout voice: "Heavenly Father, we thank Thee for all these Thy manifold good gifts to us," and he ducked his head hastily and looked as if he had expected it; and the awkward moment again after the blessing was over, and they all sat there, just before someone started passing things. And he knew the food! The platter of fried chicken, the mashed potatoes with the butter making a little golden hollow, the awkward bowl of gravy, the big slices of good home-made Iowa bread, the cucumber pickles, sweet pickles, beet pickles, red jelly, honey, corn relish, in a succession of little glass dishes that kept him so busy passing he hardly knew when to eat. "Now, there ain't much, Ralph, but what there is you're dearly welcome to." "Help yourself, Ralph. Make out a meal." "We're plain, ma and me. *You* know that. But I guess we can manage to get ye fed." "Take it all, Ralph, there's more in the kitchen." Of course the table should have been surrounded by children. Still, the feeling was

the same. Cool autumn sunshine came in through the window across the red glass pickle dish, and there was a faint odour from the plants.

"If I'd just known ye's coming, I'd sent out for some of the children to come in," Mother Hockaday said. "May, she's got some of Hank's folks there right now, but Dollie, she might have come in, and Jack, and Eddie—why didn't we telephone 'em, pa?"

"Oh, but, mother," Ralph said hastily, "I wouldn't have you go to so much work."

"Oh, I'm used to cooking for a big raft of folks. Sure I am," she said easily. "I can still get up a meal for 'em if I am getting old."

"Every Sunday we're together," Father Hockaday said. "Every Sunday I got my girls and boys about me as if we's still all living together on the farm. Children and grandchildren and great-grandchildren all together."

"Well, it's nice. It's a comfort for us. Sure it is. That's what I say. Help yourself to the pickles, Ralph. Maybe you'd like this kind better.—But what'd the children say if they knew Ralph was here, pa?" she continued. "What'd Jack say, d'ye s'pose? Ralph, ye better call Jack up after dinner. See what he says!"

"I'll do that," Ralph answered heartily.

"What d'ye s'pose Jack'll say? What'd *May* say, pa?"

She was still talking of that when they had all finished eating and she had come into the parlour after washing the dishes. She had brushed her rippling hair, and put on a thin dress of figured lawn with a ruffle around the bottom of the skirt, and a black ribbon about her waist. She stood listening delightedly while Ralph rang four long and a short for Jack on the old-fashioned telephone.

"Hello! Jack Hockaday speaking?—Know who this is, Jack? You *don't*?—Well, do remember a certain brother of yours?—Yes, it is. It most assuredly is, Ralph—yes." ("Bet he's surprised—ain't he?" Mother Hockaday cried gleefully.) "Wish I could, old fellow, but I'm here on a fly-

ing trip, you might say.—You *do* that. I'd like to see the other boys, too."

"Jack coming in?" Mother Hockaday asked delightedly.

"Yes, coming in to-night after milking."

"I knew he would. Sure, they all will. They'll all want to see Ralph."

Ralph was touched at the delight with which Jack had greeted him. And Jack and his wife were coming in, and were going to stop for Fred and Dollie, and send word to Ed and Will and May. Suddenly he found himself anxious to see them all. Why, he would have thought that the younger ones, like Ed and Dollie, would have half forgotten him by this time!

"You ought to make us a real visit, Ralph," Mother Hockaday said anxiously. "Jack'll want ye to go out there. See the old place. Jack's always thought so much of you. He still talks about what he and Ralph used to do."

He would have liked to see the old farm. He had supposed that to spend a few hours here, see the two old people once more, would have been enough for him. But he answered with regret: "Mother, I surely wish that I could." He went on to explain to her troubled uncomprehending eyes about an appointment in Louisville for Thursday, another in Birmingham. She did not see why he could not stay longer. He hardly saw why himself.

"Well, I *wish* ye could stay," she repeated. "You know we're gettin' old, pa and me."

Father Hockaday settled himself in his chair and took off his shoes again, now that the superficial strangeness of Ralph's clothes and manner had worn off. "So ye're a great traveller, Ralph," he began. "Ye been across the water and to foreign lands."

"Why, yes, father!" Ralph gave a flashing smile. "But what's that? You came over from England yourself. You've been a traveller. Mother, too."

"Yes," the old lady said vaguely. "Pa and ma did. Me, too, only I was so little then. But I don't like to have ye so

far away, Ralph. Now we're gettin' old, pa and me, it's a comfort for us to have our children all living round us. Jack, he's on the old place, and Eddie where Uncle Abel Wood used to live. May, she's the farthest, out of Edinburgh. If you got to be in the city, why don't ye settle in Chicago, Ralph? That wouldn't be so bad. Then we could see ye often."

"Oh, I can't settle yet, mother," he answered lightly. "Too many places to go. Too much to do."

"Not ready to settle, Ralph? Well, when ye goin' to be? You're over forty, ain't ye? Sure ye are."

"Oh, forty's young nowadays, mother."

"Ye ought to settle, Ralph," Father Hockaday said. "It ain't right, the way you're living. It's often come to me, it ain't right. Here's all my boys, each one with his good wife and his home and his children growing up around him—only Ralph, now. And I often think, I wish ye could find a woman for ye, Ralph. Every man ought to have a helpmate. Look at ma and me. What'd either of our lives been alone?"

"It's so lonesome for you, my dear," the old lady said commiseratingly.

The light smile with which Ralph had been listening at first had gradually become set and painful on his lips. He felt the sudden shock of a different point of view. He had been easily sure of the superiority of his life—but how could he hope to explain it to them? The moving with world events, the meeting with the choice of the earth, the advantages of freedom, the sharp spur of competition, the eager gnawing need of work, the place that he had won for himself? It seemed to be melting away from him. He was all at once conscious of a void in the very centre of his being. It unsettled him, it made him feel as if he were swimming in thin air. It was hard for him to answer, to turn the talk aside.

Father Hockaday said slyly: "But it's too late for you to get your old girl, Ralph. Yes, while ye's away, another

man stepped in. Oh, she's a lovely woman, Dora is. I couldn't have asked better than to have had ye marry Dora."

"Yes, but he can't have Dora, now, pa," Mother Hockaday put in. "And she ain't just the kind he'd want any more. Ralph'd want a more stylish kind of woman, like him." Ralph laughed. "Yes, you find ye one, Ralph," she persisted. "Ain't you met some woman you'd like, in some of those places where ye been? Ye've been around enough."

"Perhaps I haven't found any who'd like me."

"Don't tell me that, my dear," she answered proudly. He patted her hand.

"He'd never find a better woman than Dora Cross," old Luke repeated. "A good mother, and a good church worker, and a good housekeeper. He ought never to have let her go."

"Yes, but, pa, Ralph didn't want to settle here. He wanted to see the world a little."

"Well, now he's seen it, ain't he? Now it's time for him to settle and make a home for himself, like all men does."

Ralph did not reply. After a silence—"Dora Cross!" he exclaimed, half humorously. "I haven't thought of her for years. Whom'd she marry, father?"

"Why, this Tom Stonecipher. Ain't ye never heard?"

"Never!" He laughed softly.

"There's where ye lost a good woman, Ralph."

"I wish ye could see Dora, Ralph——"

"Oh, no, mother! Spare me that." He held up his hand. That was where he *would* see changes, in his boyhood sweetheart. He much preferred to keep her as he saw her now, a round face and fair hair surrounded by a kind of mist.

Old Luke was still harping on the same subject. "Melie Penhollow's still single, Ralph. Ye might get her."

"Melie Penhollow! What's Ralph want of *her*?"

"Oh, now, Melie ain't such a bad woman. If she didn't have that kind o' squint-like——"

"Of course she ain't a bad woman. Melie's a nice girl. But *Ralph* don't want no one like Melie."

"Grace Smith—she's a nice woman, now. I'd like to see Grace get a husband."

"You let *Ralph* pick out his own wife, pa. He knows who he wants better'n you do, I guess."

"Well, why don't he do it, then?" the old man grumbled. "He's had time enough. I just thought I'd help him out a little."

"Thanks, father! Of course you did." *Ralph* laughed, but he felt uncomfortable.

A wife, a home, and a child—these things continued under all the seeming revolution in the lives of men. Eagerness and striving after other things—and then a sense of emptiness, and back to the old things again. Even he himself. He might come back to them.

Mother Hockaday brought out an immense scrap-book in which, among long obituaries and accounts of weddings from the *Walnut Echo*, she finally found an ancient picture of *Ralph*, in a high collar and bow tie, from a newspaper, and even some of his articles which other people had discovered for her in magazines.

"Why mother, I didn't know you'd care for all these things!" he exclaimed.

She put her hand on his knee and looked at him. "Why, *Ralph*, didn't I bring ye up? Ain't you one of my boys? Sure you are."

He sat back smiling and scarcely trusting himself to speak. He felt, to his wonder, a kind of resurrection of his boyhood self.

He was soon talking again, in his rapid and vivid way, trying to give them some faint ghost of a notion of all the things that he had seen and done. They listened with ingenuous delight. Several times, Mother Hockaday laid her hand on his knee and stopped him while she turned to the old man to exclaim: "Don't that sound like *Ralph*, now, pa?"

"Does it?" Ralph asked, laughing a little. "Was I always such a talker, mother?"

"You was always a fine talker," she said fondly. "Bett'r'n any of the boys. He was, wasn't he, pa?"

"He talked a little too much, ma, when you'd set him at the churn." They all laughed. "And he was awful hard to keep quiet in church. While the minister was praying, he'd twist, and *he'd* wiggle, and then he'd get all the rest of the boys to wigglin', and then he'd sneeze—"

Ralph laughed hilariously, recognizing the picture. But the old lady would not laugh at him. "Well, they was awful long, pa, Mr. Soper's prayers always was. I don't really know that I blamed the boy. Mr. Soper was a good man and a lovely preacher, but his prayers was long, that I've always said."

"Mother always sticks up for her boys."

"Sure I do, Ralph, sure I do."

But while he talked, although it soothed some dissatisfaction of his to see that they were struck with naïve admiration of his having seen so many places, he could see that they did not really take it in. To their minds, it was Will and Ed and Jack who had achieved success. They admired Ralph, and yet they could not understand—how he lived, why he had no family, just what he was doing anyhow. He tried to give them some idea of what was going on in the world. But although they would exclaim: "Yes, things are changing! Nothing ever stays the same in this world," they said it comfortably, like repeating some old axiom, not as if they really grasped it at all. Once the old man said: "Yes, they talk about changin' everything, changin' everything. All this new machinery and all. But far as I see, no one's yet found the way to make the corn grow any way but from first planting the seed, and then it gettin' watered by the rains and het by the sun, tosselin' out and bein' cut. And folks stays about the same." The old lady had always been the brighter of the two. Her eyes were a little troubled as she tried to comprehend it all. But

what pleased both of them was when they could catch some phrase or gesture that reminded them of the boy Ralph. Then they would exclaim in delight: "Didn't that sound like Ralph? Didn't it now?" And they would go on to relate, minutely, characteristics of his that he would have supposed no human being would have cared to remember—how he had always wanted to use that pink marbled soap to wash with, how he would never wear a certain kind of hat that all the other boys wore, how he would not take cream in his coffee. Human relationships were what they understood, the things to which they clung.

Gradually, in spite of his amusement and pleasure at arousing their amazement, he grew quiet, and soon ceased talking altogether. These things of which he spoke seemed, even to him, far away. The autumn air, cool and sunny, came in through the open door. He could look out and see, along the crest of the upland pasture, oaks with blood-red patches through which the sun shone. Sometimes a rooster crowed, sometimes a flock of birds whirred up from the tree outside. Years dropped away. He began to realize in his secret mind a kind of sameness under everything. He imagined himself in the midst of whirling water suddenly touching bed rock and finding it just about what it had always been.

They began to talk to him, to tell him all about Will and Jack and Eddie and May and Dollie; and about the boys and girls whom he had known in school—how this one had married such a one, and this one had died, and this one moved into town. He could see that all the while they were still puzzling themselves as to why *he* had never married, and feeling, in spite of their pride in his accomplishments, a kind of sorrow that they could not see *him*, like the other boys, settled. He began to feel even a kind of dissatisfaction with himself, to think with distaste of the journey he must take that night, vaguely to wish that, in all the world, there was something to which he could feel himself so attached as they were to these hills.

The old man wandered off after a time, lay down on the lounge in the dining room, and went to sleep.

"Pa's gettin' to sleep so much," the old lady complained. "I'm real ashamed of him in church. Oh, we've got a lovely minister now, Ralph! I wish ye could hear him." And then she said: "I'm going over to the cemetery, my dear. Wouldn't ye like to come along? Grandpa and Grandma's there now, ye know, pa's folks and mine. Yes, do. Put on your cap. We'll go over there together and let pa have his nap."

She put on her little black straw hat and he took his travelling cap in his hand. He loitered about the yard while she picked some of the late asters to take with her, and showed him just where she had had all her summer flowers, lamenting that he had come too late to see the four o'clocks and moss roses and sweet peas. Then they went along the road together, Ralph checking his brisk walk to suit her slow step.

He opened the small iron gate of the cemetery for her. The big gate for vehicles, with its imposing scroll top, was locked with a chain. He followed her into the quiet place. The grass was still a little green. The tall evergreens stood in a sombre dusk, and the little breeze, that was so sunny and fresh outside, made a different sound in their big creaking boughs. Still, it was a pleasant place, with the low brown hills and pastures beyond, the autumn woods, and the little town off at the west. Some of the trees were noisy with birds. As he followed Mother Hockaday past the Soldiers' Monument, he noted the familiar names on the stones—Wade, Wood, Penhollow, Davies, Stonecipher, Reed. Since he had been here, one generation had slowly and almost imperceptibly passed, had taken up its abode in this quiet place not very far from the old homes. That had its beauty.

The Hockaday lot was in a corner of the cemetery. He pleased Mother Hockaday by admiring the plain stone of polished granite with a kind of scroll at the top, instead

of the lofty monument of the Reeds. He stood watching her. These rites had long been strange to him. She plucked off some withered flowers on the mound with the small headstone "Mother," and he filled for her at the pump a glass that had tipped over and that had a faint greenish stain and odour of wilted flowers. She did not seem sad, only calm and cherishing, as when she went about her household tasks. He saw that the asters were not for Grandma and Grandpa but for a little grave that he had quite forgotten—of the little two-year-old Agnes who had died of diphtheria nearly forty years ago. The old-fashioned white slab, on which the letters were faint and weather-worn, slanted back over the small sunken mound.

"Some of those autumn leaves would look nice, wouldn't they, Ralph?" the old lady said. "You know you can paraffine them. If we had time we'd go into the woods and get some, wouldn't we? I always think the hard maples are so lovely."

She was not through yet. She had kept some of the pink asters for another small grave. A white log, roughly cut, on which a lamb was lying, guarded it.

"'Adelaide Mellon,'" he read softly. "Why, I knew her, didn't I, mother? I remember when she died."

"Sure you did. Mrs. Mellon's been gone a good while, Ralph, but I promised her when she lay sick I'd keep little Adelaide's grave just like she'd always kept it herself. She was a lovely woman, Mrs. Mellon was. These plants look so kind o' spindling."

Ralph wandered off a little way. A faint smile was on his lips, less brilliant and more thoughtful than usually was there. He looked past the stones to the russet woods, letting the breeze stir his hair.

Mother Hockaday came and laid her hand on his arm. "What ye thinkin' about, my dear?"

He turned about. "That this wouldn't be such a bad place to sleep in, some day," he answered half whimsically.

She replied quite seriously. "So ye can, my dear, but I

hope it won't be for a long while yet. You're one of us, sure you are."

He arched his brows. He did not know whether or not there was anything serious in what he had said. In his theory, the cast-off body mattered nothing. "Oh, I fly about so much, mother, no telling where I'll end up. China or Van Diemen's Land—"

She was perturbed. "Don't say that, Ralph. No, I don't like to think of you off by yourself somewhere."

"Let me carry your basket, mother," he urged with sudden vivacity.

The old man was just coming out to the yard to look for them when they reached home. The day was going fast. The trees threw long shadows. They had supper, and after that the children drove in.

They came in Fords instead of the old buggies, but the Fords were filled just as the buggies had been with the shy staring eyes of children. May had not been able to get in, but all the rest had come. They seemed to make a great noise when they all came tramping into the house. They greeted Ralph with bashful loudness.

He was astounded at the rustic look of these foster-brothers, which seemed to him more rural, somehow, than that of other Middle-Western farmers. They were prosperous, he knew, and he had expected them to be what is called "up-and-doing," to have left the old people far behind. All of the boys except Will, who was the oldest, had thick untrimmed shocks of hair that curled about their ears and reddened necks, and Will had a patriarchal beard. Their calm eyes, slow speech, their clumsy shoes, and rosy cheeks—they were astonishingly like the English yokels whom he had seen about the doors of thatch-roofed cottages. So many of the old characteristics had survived. Only Dollie had the rippling hair and sweetly cut features of her mother, and was, in spite of her country dress and six children, a pretty woman. But children—what families they all had! Will

with eleven and Jack with eight! It seemed to him that endless relays of them were being herded shyly up to "see Uncle Ralph."

They were all a little bashful with Ralph, even Jack, his old chum; and he had a feeling of helpless dismay at the gulf which seemed to lie between him and them. He felt again a man of the world, not the old persistent self that he had been recapturing that afternoon with the old people. He was introduced solemnly to the wives and to Dollie's husband, all of whom remembered him so well that he had to pretend also to recall them. "Sure—Girlie Wade, don't you remember her?" They pumped his hand, Will owlishly, almost Biblically solemn, the others with abrupt awkward meaningless laughs. They settled down in the parlour and an agonized hush held them (broken by low commands and whispers to the children) until Mother Hockaday set them going with her repetitions of how glad she was that they could come in to see Ralph, and how sorry that May couldn't come. They began to talk shyly to him and he to answer with a somewhat exaggerated vivacity to cover his dismay.

They asked about what he had been doing "all this time," and where he had been, saying: "That so?" and "Listen to that," laughed loudly at whatever he told them that seemed odd or (to them) fanciful, and yet with a kind of blankness in their eyes that rather disconcerted him. He did not know that they were hoarding up all that he said to bring out, and to mull over, endlessly. But still it was an effort, they were uncomfortable, until they fell into the old observations and repetitions and human discussions again. Ralph sat back listening.

"You going to have woodchoppers again this year, Dollie?"

"Oh, I guess so. Fred, he wants to thin out them willows down near the creek."

"Haul 'em into town, Fred. Willow makes good wood."

"Naw, willow don't. Maple does, now. Oak's the best

wood. They ain't cuttin' much oak now. Got it too thinned out. *She* don't want the willow cut, even"—with a gesture of his thumb toward Dollie.

"No, I don't. I never want to see any of the old trees go down. I don't know, when they been there so long—"

"She keeps in the house where she can't hear them fall."

"Sure she does. I don't blame her. That's what I always done when pa got to woodchopping. I likes the trees."

"Well, frost's holding off a good while."

"Yes, the hard maples ain't even red."

"Yes, but we'll have it. We'll have frost within a week and a frost to kill. Whenever we have a spell of real warm weather like this 'long about the first of October it's always followed by a hard frost. I ain't never known it to fail."

"Well, now, about the year 1902, we had an October like this and frost never come until the nineteenth of November."

"Well, we'll have frost. You see."

"Ed Robi'son's broke his arm, d'you know that? Broke it crankin' his car. The handle flew back on him and hit him right here above the elbow."

"Sure! I always knew he'd do that some time. He always took hold of it kind o' back-handed like. I told him so. I says: 'Ed, that'll fly back on you some day and break your arm for you.' No! He knew what he was doin'. Can't never tell a Robi'son nothing."

Ralph sat back and listened, his eyes now bright, yet full of dreamy interest. His dismay slowly wore off. The talk seemed to bring him certain country things—the bitter sappy smell of a new-felled tree, the scent of nuts in autumn woods, the tanging smell of cider in the October sun, the dry ghostly crackle of pale-gold corn stalks left standing in the fields. He began to feel a certain something about his foster-brothers that satisfied him, that curiously pleased some primitive depth in him. He began to be glad of their slow voices, their odd turns of speech, their rustic air. These

things suggested the deep stabilities of country life—the slow inevitable progression of the seasons, the nearness to earth and sky and weather, the unchanging processes of birth and death, the going of the birds in the fall and their sure return in the spring, the coming, night after night, of the familiar stars to the wide country sky.

Somehow it pleased him now to think of how deeply rooted they were. It gave him, confirmed wanderer as he was, "something to tie to." No wonder that they were so little changed. After all, where had they been? Back and forth over the same old roads, bringing their crops into Walnut. To Edinburgh to the County Fair or to the Chautauqua on the night when Krill's Band played; and when they had real shopping to do, perhaps as far as Dubuque. They might have gone farther but they had little desire. Other places to them were a kind of dream. They laughed at them indulgently. Perhaps some day, when all the children were grown and they in turn had left the farm, they might "take a trip." But it would be without pleasure, largely under protest, and they would come home sooner than they had planned. "Pa, he got sick of it. Ma, she didn't want to stay no longer." People, even in Edinburgh, travelled widely now. But here they stayed close to their own soil.

The first strangeness had quite worn off. Ralph caught looks, characteristics, of the boys and girls he had known. They did the same with him. Jack, his old comrade, who had at first seemed the strangest, was now the most familiar. Under his red hardened skin his features had remained curiously unchanged. There was a kind of shy friendliness in Jack's eyes under that shock of hair—just as when they were children, not speaking to each other, perhaps, when there were other people present, but always conscious of the secret bond between them. It was there still, something kindred, under all the difference. Still that something that he liked about Jack, that made him feel a little closer to him than to all the rest. That was perhaps the one friend-

ship, incongruous as it seemed, which would never break. He would always have the feeling that Jack was there.

At half-past nine they began to gather the children together. The old people had already endured visible agonies of sleepiness. They all became solemn and formal again, as they shook hands with Ralph and urged him to "Come and see *us* next time. Come when you can stay a little longer." Jack stood beside him for a few minutes, awkwardly, before he cranked the Ford. "Well, Ralph, better come out to the old place again. Still a few croppies, I guess, in the creek." "Thanks. I'll do that, Jack." "Yes, sure. Well—" Jack could not think of anything else to say. One of the children called: "Ain't you going to crank her, pa?" "Well— I'll say good-bye, Ralph," he said then.

Ralph stood out on the lawn until even the sound of the cars was lost in the stillness of the country night. He looked up at a sky thick with stars. He heard the familiar sounds of the old people moving about in the house, going out to the kitchen, closing windows. Old Luke padded about in his stocking feet just as Grandpa Hockaday had always done. Finally Ralph went in.

His train left at eleven-thirty. Somehow he managed to overcome Mother Hockaday's scruples against his being allowed to go to the station alone, at having no one to "see him off safely." He could see that the old man was in an agony to get to bed. For the last hour he had been squirming in his chair, easing first one leg and then the other. Mother Hockaday kept saying: "I can't think we're doing right, Ralph, to let ye go off by yourself"; but he managed to take leave of them at the house.

Father Hockaday became impressively solemn. He held Ralph's hand in a hard and yet feeble grip. Ralph returned the pressure, stirred at the feel of the rough aged skin. "Ralph, the Lord keep ye," the old man said.

Ralph turned to Mother Hockaday. He took her silently in his arms. When he let her go, he could see tears in her eyes, but she followed him to the door smiling mistily.

"Well, Ralph, I hope ye have a good safe journey. And get some sleep on the way."

"I will. Don't worry. Good-bye, father. Good-bye, mother."

He hurried off. They still stood in the lighted doorway. At the gate he looked back and made a gay gesture of good-bye.

Father Hockaday, who still had a great respect for trains, had insisted on getting him off in plenty of time. He walked very slowly. He did not look back at the old house, which showed a light now in the bedroom window, but he was conscious of it. Conscious of the old people whom he might never see again. Instead, he looked at the silent street, where never a light shone, where his heels rang out loudly. He looked at the thick strewing of stars on the night sky. The low line of hills was just visible, a patch of immovable darkness.

Only the agent was at the station. Ralph got his ticket, then went outdoors again and sat down on an empty baggage truck. He could hear the click of the telegraph inside. It sounded sharp and lonely. The air was chill outside, but it pleased him.

His lips were curved in a musing smile. To-morrow, this little place would seem a million miles away—almost out of existence. But he was aware that since he had stepped off the train in the morning, the current of his thoughts had been changed. He felt steadied, deeply satisfied. He looked toward the dark pastures beyond the row of dusky willow-trees. They widened slowly into the open country which lay silent, significant, motionless, immense, under the stars, with its sense of something abiding.

The train came in—huge, noisy, threatening in the silence. Ralph sprang expertly aboard. The familiar sense of travel engulfed him immediately. He had found his berth, arranged things swiftly, before the station of Walnut was left behind. He was alert, modern, a traveller again.

But all night long, as he lay half sleeping, swinging lightly

with the motion of the train, he was conscious of that silent spreading country outside, over which changes passed like the shadows of the clouds across the pastures; and it gave him a deep quietude.

Just Him and Her

I

“**W**HO lives in that little house at the edge of town across from the cemetery?”

“Oh, that’s where the Lew Daveys live.”

“Just the old folks?”

“Yes. Just him and her.”

* * *

This was one of the oldest houses in Plum Branch.

It stood close to the ground and leaned forward a little. It was of a grey, aged intermediate colour. It had small-paned windows that gave out a saddish light. The porch floor sloped toward the ground and was broken at the edges. The posts were thin with an insert of lattice-work. An old buggy-seat stood on the porch. No one but an old couple would be living in such a house.

There was a grey picket fence around the lawn, but not around the garden that sloped south to the straggling grassy road that went only as far as the hilly pasture across from the house. Lilac-bushes grew so close to this fence that the leaves pushed between the pickets. There was no gate, but a scraggly cedar-tree on each side of the opening like a gate post. A clump of tall pines grew in one corner of the lawn, and, underneath, a mass of bluebells standing like a pool of blue water. There were flowering bushes close to the house wall and a lily-of-the-valley bed near the porch, in a corner.

In the back yard stood plum-trees with smoke-black branches strangely wind-blown and now a delicate froth of greenish white bloom.

The house was on the outskirts of town. A red-brown clay road went past it and died out in a few grassy wagon tracks at the fence of Glissendorf's pasture. The Plum Branch cemetery was up this road a little way. The white tombstones were set thick among blackish evergreens where birds were always busy. Just across from the house, a hill pasture rose in an emerald mound. It was sprinkled with buttercups. A little brown path was cut around it. A wooden gate fastened with an old wire gave entrance. A reddish-coloured dilapidated wagon stood in the grass at the foot of the hill. Plum Branch, the creek, was beyond the hill in a limestone gully.

2

The Lew Daveys had come to Plum Branch among the early settlers, but now not many people seemed to know them. They were retired farmers. Mr. Davey had a team and did a little hauling and his own gardening. He still owned a farm west of town. They lived on the rent—on a little of it. Most of it they saved.

Some of the ladies in the Congregational church—Mrs. Sperry, Mrs. Kuehnle, Edie Robbins—always took pains to think of Mrs. Davey, to ask her to missionary meetings and to solicit her for church suppers, to speak to her at church. But she went out very little.

They both did go to church, however, every Sunday morning, and sat at the side in the fifth row from the front. People sometimes asked who that old couple were who always sat in the fifth row. "He" was short and stocky, but now he began to look very frail—hollowed out between the big bones. He had a short rough beard. "She" had a greyish sad indeterminate face like the face of her house. She wore an old dark-blue suit with gathered sleeves, a small

black hat with a bunch of black ribbon at the side, and grey cotton gloves.

They never made much response when the minister shook hands with them after church. They never seemed to make much response to anything. There was a kind of emptiness in their faces—yet not stupidity. As if they had lived on so long without exactly meaning to, and couldn't make much of it. In church, their gnarled, misshapen hands, with the skin stretched tight over the knuckle bones and hollow and wrinkled between, lay with a kind of mournful patience in their laps. They had worked hard all their lives. Now there was no need.

The air of their house was clean, and yet there was something mouldy about it. The rooms were scrubbed, but that could not lighten the dark, old-fashioned look of the brown-painted woodwork and cupboards and the dark-grey rag rugs with threads of red. Everything was aired religiously, but there could be no freshness in the look of the orange plush on the parlour chairs and settee, the brown-and-red calico cushion on the lounge, the red-chequered table-cloth, the little old ornaments and pictures in walnut or silvered frames, the dark wall-paper. The plants, too, growing in tin cans wrapped in crêpe paper—the geraniums, the ferns, the cactus, the dark-red foliage, the red lilies.

It was strange to step into this house in its out-of-the-way setting and sense the old left-over life lingering on in it.

It seemed as if they must always have been living in this house, but really it was not so long. When the children were gone they had stayed on at the farm for a few years and then rented it and moved into town, as most farmers did. They said they were getting along and it was time to take some comfort in life.

Their farm was out on the Sand Spring road just off the highway—a greyish, rain-stained house like this, shaded with bushes, with fowls straggling over the yard and the needle-matted ground under the grove of evergreens. It had never been a rich farm, but they had made "enough."

They had had a big family. The pictures of all the children were in the blue, plush-covered album with the steel clasps on the centre table.

The one of Levi, the oldest, was a wedding picture. It had been taken at the old photographer's in Adamsville, where all the wedding couples used to go. It had a background of blurry trees done in charcoal work on a big screen, and in front of this the bride was sitting on an artificial stump, with the groom standing beside her. The bride was one of the Liebes. She had a broad German face with a fringe of light hair straight across it, and she wore a white basque strained tightly across her big breast and hips. Levi had curly hair and a curly moustache and a sour, dubious look. They had moved out to Nebraska and Levi had died of cancer of the stomach. "She" had married again.

The next two children, Edwin and Lily, had died in infancy—only two black memorial cards with their names and dates and verses of Scripture, with two doves bearing open Bibles, in gold. They were buried out in the little Sand Spring cemetery, hardly used any more, where the old slabs of white were now toppling over the sunken, grass-covered mounds under the sad-creaking evergreens.

Luella, the oldest girl, now lived in Diagonal, in the southern part of the State. Her husband had a vulcanizing works. In her picture she had a slight wild-flower prettiness—small features under frizzled bangs—but she was now scrawny, overworked, bitter-tongued, with a great brood of children and "nothing to do with." She wrote home occasionally on scraps of yellowish scratch paper torn from the children's tablets, and sometimes the old lady made little nightgowns for the youngest of the children.

Sam, the next boy, was a farmer. He did not write, but sometimes he brought his whole family in the car and stopped over for Sunday dinner.

Achsia, the favourite daughter—they always called her Axie—lived close by in Adamsville, the county seat. Her mother used to go often to see her, but now she seldom did.

She said she was getting so she hated to go to places. Axie still wrote, and the children wrote. Axie was fat and dark, rather pop-eyed. She had a good, sentimental heart and had always been kind to the old folks.

John had died of tuberculosis when he was twenty-seven. In the picture it could be seen that he was of a more delicate mould than the others—his nose thin, temples slightly hollowed, thoughtful eyes. There was a ghastly enlarged picture of him in a silvered frame on the parlour wall with all the life retouched out of it. His tombstone in the family lot could be seen just beyond the Soldiers' Monument in the cemetery.

Walter had gone West and had a fruit farm now in Oregon. They seldom heard from him. Or from Barney, who had not turned out well, and was still unsettled—going to a place and then tearing up and leaving almost as soon as he got there. The last they had heard of him, he had been working at the docks in New Orleans. He was separated from his wife, whom the old people had never seen.

These were all that were left to them.

They knew a few old people around town, but not well. They had never had time to get acquainted with folks. Sometimes "she" drove out into the country to see the Old Lady Finley, who was living with her daughter. "He" went down to the store occasionally and hung around with the other old fellows who sat on the bench under the awning until the sun got around that way.

They still got up at five or half past every morning. "He" started the fire in the cookstove and "she" made the breakfast of fried eggs or buckwheat cakes that was just what they had always had. They ate at the kitchen table, silently, the old man bent over the table and shovelling in his food, the old lady jumping up to wait on him as in the old days when she had had the men to feed.

Then he went out to hoe a little in the garden. You could see his bowed, gnarly figure in the faded shirt and overalls, moving slowly, with a strange sad significance, over the soft

earth-brown of the ploughed field; the green pastures beyond, and the blossoming plum-trees that scented the May air.

But he couldn't do much any more. He had tried to trim up the plum-trees this spring, but had suddenly grown dizzy up there where the thin, black branches criss-crossed against the blue sky, and had almost "had a fall."

He was not even going to do hauling this spring. He liked to feed the two big horses in the barn that smelled of hay and manure. All the stock he had now, and he had always been good to his stock. The horses were fed up so, the men in town said, that they were too lazy to pull a load.

Then there were errands "she" could send him on down town. He did most of the trading and still handled all the money. "She" was careful how she used up stamps and crochet cotton, for she hated to ask him for more. Their money lay in the Plum Branch Bank, ready to be distributed among the children when they were gone.

The old man was not unhappy working in his garden. He liked the smell of the soil. But it was so small, so no account, after the farm. He had a feeling of being lost, somehow, "let down."

"She" was better off. Her work had never seemed to count for as much as his. It had not brought in the money. But it had lasted better. It fitted into the new place. She still had a house to look after, and time to do it right at last. She did everything herself—washing, ironing, baking, cleaning, sewing.

And then there were her plants. She had always been a great hand for plants, but had never had much time for them on the farm. She had red foliage plants and cactus and red King lilies. She tended the plants in the afternoon when all the housework was "done up" and no one could reproach her.

Then she did crotchetting and knitting, although her eyes were giving out. Now she was working on a crotcheted filet yoke for Axie's Marguerite's graduating clothes. She al-

ways had some work in hand in the flowered silk bag that Marguerite had made for her.

Still, this was not much after her work with that big family—every minute full. Sometimes when she sat down to her fancy work, quite contentedly in the afternoon, a feeling of guilt would come over her. It would seem as if there was something she ought to be doing. Then she too would feel lost, sitting there in her little cane-seated rocker by the dining-room window, looking out beyond the pines to the white stones in the cemetery.

The children—all gone. None of them needed her any more. None of them had seemed to need her very long. Except John. He had needed her. He used to sit in the big rocker by the west window in the farm-house, reading the magazines that the minister brought out to him. He used to call for her when she was out on the place at work. She felt closer now to John, in his long grave in the cemetery just down the road a little way, than to the others. There was something she still could do for John. She could care for his grave, plant it with pansies, put on it her choicest flowers. She took a kind of strange, sad pride in its order and beauty.

She had never had much time to give to the children when they were small. As soon as they were grown they had married and left her. Each other was all these two had left.

3

They did not talk much. They never had. When they did, it was in a dry, faintly sarcastic tone. They would have been ashamed to show affection. They would not have thought it becoming in old folks.

Besides, what they felt was not affection. It was a feeling of belonging.

The only things on earth to which they were still of use were each other, they were not left over, and lingering on.

"He" locked the doors and made all safe as he had always done. He tinkered around and made things a little handier for her. He went for the mail and brought in the milk and got her medicine for her at the doctor's. "She" mended his clothes and kept him tidy, saw to his comfort, cooked the food that he could eat. Each felt a kind of deep, unspoken reliance on the other, and their age that was setting them apart from everything else was pulling them together. No one else knew what they had been through. No one else understood.

In these spring evenings, "she" sat out on the buggy-seat on the porch and "he" on the step below her, staring ahead of them—at the line of the green hill pasture against the sky, at the unused road beyond the fence. "He" might say: "Corn's goin' in late this year," or "she": Who's that I see going into the cemetery just now? Looked like it might be Haller's folks." The sky deepened to cool dark blue; a little moon hung over the plum-trees. The thick green grass was wet, sent up a fresh night odour. The old wagon stood sad, forlorn, at the foot of the hill. "Well, might's well go to bed, I s'pose. D'you put the hoe in the barn?"

They got up and went into the warm, dark house, lit a lamp in the small downstairs bedroom, undressed, climbed into the old pine bedstead. Neither would have thought of going without the other, somehow.

The pale light from the window that they never opened until June silvered their thin, hollow faces and lay like frost on their hair.

But they were feeble now. The life was running out. Axie said she had them on her mind. She even wrote a letter to Sam about them in her childish, sentimental hand without any capital letters. She kept meaning to run over to Plum Branch. But somehow she never got there.

The minister could see it when he went to call. He was glad to meet George Horton on the street so that he could say what was in his mind: "I went over to the Lew Daveys' this afternoon. You know, they're getting pretty

feeble. I'm afraid the old man won't last much longer."

They knew it themselves in a kind of way. They gave up one thing after another—going to church, trips to town. When they sat, a kind of silence seemed to muffle them in.

But it was the old lady who went first. Before the blue-bells were gone, before she could see how many plums there would be on the trees that year, before the yellow and purple pansies were out on the lot in the cemetery. She was sick only a few days. Axie was there. The old man wandered about the place, stood in the barn, sat out on the old buggy-seat. She was unconscious most of the time. But just at the last she seemed to give him a look—full of a kind of mute, intense meaning.

The old man seemed to "take it" better than they had feared. He was quiet and docile; he hardly spoke. He let Axie lead him about at the funeral, washed and brushed, in his best black clothes.

"I don't know as pa ever seemed to make over her much," Axie said to Sam, "but he'll miss her just the same."

Afterward they looked about the place for him and finally found him sitting out on the cistern by the side wall where some white violets grew. He did not seem to be grieving—only sitting with his hands on his knees. They felt relieved; they could hardly have said why.

Axie put her arms around him. "Come on into the house with us, don't you want to, pa?"

He let her lead him in. They went into the dining-room, that seemed pitiful and useless now. Axie sat down on the lounge beside him and took his hand. Sam went on creaking solemnly up to the rocker.

"Pa, I'm going to stay with you to-night," Axie said, "and until I've got things all looked after. But after that I got to go back. I got the children, you know. Don't you want to come back with me, pa?"

She stroked his hand. Sam did not dare to look at them—he stared at an old faded photograph of the farm that hung behind the stove.

"Why, yes," the old man said vacantly. "I guess I might do that."

"I'd love to have you, pa." Axie's voice shook with relief. "Just think how the children will like it." She kissed his hand. He did not notice her.

"Well," Sam said, rising, "I suppose me and the missus had better be starting if we're going to get back. Good-bye, pa." He shook hands awkwardly.

"Good-bye. Good-bye."

The old man went to bed when Axie told him to that night. The next day he was just the same. He went about the place, stood a little while here and a little there, sat out on the cistern again. There was a vacancy in his eyes. He did not seem to be thinking or feeling much.

The next day at twilight Axie went into the dining-room to speak to him. He was not there; but she could see him in the parlour, in the plush chair by the window, a queer place for him to sit. But there was a stillness—she knew before she called out "Pa!" and went up to him, that he was gone.

"Just like that," she told her husband tearfully. "I left him while I went out to the kitchen, and when I came back he was already gone!"

* * *

People in Plum Branch had not thought very much about it when the old lady died. They had only said: "I hear Old Lady Davey died this morning." But they talked of the old man's death, the women in their houses, the men in the Post Office and the depot and the store.

"Yes, sir, that was a queer thing. There didn't seem to be anything special the matter with him—no sickness, you could say. It just seemed as if when *she* went *he* wanted to go too. Couldn't keep on without her. Didn't know what to do with himself, they'd been together so long. I've known of other old couples like that."

The Resurrection



E whom they had always thought of as Mr. Ward, but who all this day had been a shadowy, necessary, scarcely seen and yet alleviating presence, was at the parlour door.

"I think you may——" He nodded solemnly.

They rose stiffly, the desultory talk they had been keeping up stricken with silence.

After a moment, Clara, who was nearest the door, murmured: "Shall I go first?"

She moved on, keeping hold of her husband's arm, and the others followed.

Little Jean kept close to her father, her big bright eyes very wide open. Helen was near them, hiding with an almost sullen look the pounding of her heart.

Grandpa walked by himself in a kind of stolid bewilderment. His daughters glanced at him anxiously, but did not go to him. He moved ponderously in his square-toed blackened shoes—an old man's shoes. The discomfort that he had always felt on Sundays, when Grandma had made him put on his "other clothes," was intensified, ludicrously and yet tragically. Now, for a day, he had sat around the house, pitifully out of ease in his solemn best clothes, his big scarred hands idle on his knees.

Was it Grandma who was having all this fuss made for her? That was not like her. No wonder he did not believe it.

The parlour seemed to be motionless in a strange chill.

All its well-known characteristics were curiously heightened—its order, its prim propriety, its smell of Brussels carpet and painted woodwork. Every chair was strangely significant—and the stand, the fern, the bookcase, the centre table with the Bible. All seemed new, and at the same time more familiar than ever before.

So the persons standing there felt themselves more than ever as individuals, and far more than ever as a family.

At once they were aware of an alien scent of flowers, breathlessly still. Reluctant, yet moved by a yearning inner necessity, they moved close about and looked upon her.

Here was the very essence of that blended familiarity and strangeness. Her crimped white hair was parted neatly, as always, held by her own shell combs. She wore her black silk dress. But the alien look of hot-house flowers upon her plain small person that they had seemed to know so well—and, most of all, her face . . .

Little Jean whispered: "Mamma, is it *Grandma*?"

"Yes, dear, of course. Don't you know her?"

The child did not answer. Just so, on autumn mornings, she had looked out to see her whole familiar world transfigured by the silver touch of frost. This was like frost—still, white, and wonderful.

Clara made an uncontrollable murmur.

"I never saw her look so lovely," said Lil.

The sisters—Clara, Lil, and Jennie—drew together. The three sons-in-law made a murmur of assent. Then, after a decorous interval, feeling more terribly out of place than at their weddings in this same room, they stole out, one after another.

Helen, who had come afraid, and because they said she must, stood now in awe to find this still beauty where she had expected terror.

Little Jean's wonderment was in the minds of all: Is this *Grandma*?

Her face, like the things in the room, baffled them with its blending of the known and unknown. The small aged

features were hers—more than ever hers. But the look . . .

"It is not herself," the daughters thought.

"It is herself," the old man felt.

They had been used to know her as a little, gentle, fluttering-voiced woman, anxiously unobtrusive, trying always with pathetic eagerness to "do for" them. They had seen her always at work—cooking for them all, mending for Grandpa, mending and sewing for them, then making things for their children, little dresses, underwear, and lastly rows and rows of knitted lace for tiny petticoats. Only a few times, when they were children, they had caught her, just at dusk, sitting alone by the kitchen window staring out at the grey light behind the apple-trees; and had crept away, feeling awed and very lonely. But mostly they had never thought of her as a person in herself. She had been Mother, and, then, Grandma.

Now the lonely feeling came back to them, deepened, and with a wondering hurt. The strange inscrutable superiority of death crushed them. They had lost their mother indeed.

Her household look was gone from her; and now, at the moment of supposed extinction, her essential self, overlaid, neglected, for years upon years, had taken radiant, calm possession. They were bewildered, filled with an obscure remorse. She who had been so simply Mother, had she, too, been something other than she seemed? The essential solitude of every human soul came over them with icy breath. And yet she was beautiful! They had the feeling of someone who stands upon a high mountain top and sees, with an awe transcending fear, the barren sublimity of space.

Was this Grandma?

After a silent, tearful, concentrated look, that carved that still face for ever on their hearts, they touched the little girls and moved away. They could not see her again, they would have gazed for ever, but the very poignancy of the moment made it end.

But Grandpa did not move. His lips, covered with a frost of beard, hung apart. There was a pathetic puzzlement, rather than grief, in his eyes. Clara looked at her sisters, moved toward him, then went uncertainly away. He stayed on alone.

He could never have spoken, even to himself, the dim strange things that moved in his clumsy brain. It meant something, he felt. That look was a sign. But he could not make it out. Some of the hurt that his daughters had felt worked at his old heart. But mostly wonderment.

He knew, half unconsciously, this look so strange to all the rest. It was the spirit of her girlhood. It was the look that she had worn to him years ago when he had first loved her. Then too she had seemed beautiful and far away.

And her beauty, her remoteness in her white silence, smote him. She had lived their life so long—never her own. He felt a kind of fear to see the spirit that, all these years with him, had underlain the acquiescence, the seeming patience of every day. Mother—Grandma—he struggled for the old familiar feeling. It would not come.

Perhaps it was only her thoughtfulness to look so fair that the children might not be frightened. Or that sense of propriety at which he had often scoffed, to look her very best upon a great occasion. Or that foolish sentiment that women have—to take with her this look as her dearest keepsake.

But he felt that it was a sign. And strange things struggled in him for clearness. It seemed that she might wear this look to show that that religion of hers, which had meant nothing to him, was not so foolish after all—a woman's affair. Broken phrases of it went through his mind— Shall be no sorrow there— All your sorrows shall be forgotten— All shall be bliss— The Resurrection and the Life—

This look of hers . . . that vague hurt beset him. Why should she look so instead of the familiar way of their life together? The wrinkles, the hollows, the marks of care and toil, were gone, were as if they had not been. Her virgin

untouched self shone supreme. Had their whole life counted for nothing at the final test? He was awed before the great relentless artistry of death, that, putting aside the minute, daily, painful sculpturing of life, had disdained it all and found this one thing fit for immortality.

He was the one human being who had seen just this look of hers before. Something proud and tearful swelled in his dumb old heart. Perhaps he would find her so again. It meant something. Thoughts of a past—long gone—flitted through his mind. For a moment he was lifted.

And then he was not sure. He felt, as always, baffled, ill at ease before beauty. He seemed more than ever an intruder, with his big clumsy feet, in this small parlour. Her fine clothes, the ceremony, the flowers, bewildered him. He felt old and hurt and doubtful.

What did it mean? Perhaps the others knew. Or perhaps it was not true—no one else had seen.

So when Helen came to the door and said: "Grandpa, mamma says to come," he turned and, looking at the young girl with puzzled misty eyes, asked her wistfully:

"Your Grandma looks—real nice—don't she, Nellie?"

Wanderers

I.

HE trustees were to meet at the parsonage to-night. The Congregational minister, Reverend Noble, was uneasy, but he was trying not to let his wife see it. After supper, he had gone out to the garden back of the house, where he had just put in the early vegetables, and was wandering about, breaking off some of the brown last year's stalks from the phlox and running his hand meditatively over the bark of the plum-tree.

His wife followed him out and stood on the back step, shivering in the April air.

"I don't know that we need to have put in all this seed," she said.

He did not answer.

"That's always the way. We plant things and someone else gets the benefit."

"Oh, now, mamma," he protested vaguely.

She gave a small sound, half a sniff, half a sigh. "You better come in and put on your other coat. They'll be here pretty soon."

She went back into the house but he lingered for a few minutes out by the plum-tree, touching and tapping the rough, cracked black bark. He liked it out here—liked the small black ploughed-up patch of garden soil, the back view of the old-fashioned white house that had no second story over the kitchen, the bare currant-bushes and the heap of

stones out along the alley, the plum-trees and the overgrown lilac-bush. The clear pale evening sky, and the coolness. Bird twitterings. . . . It gave him the sense of home.

He went into the downstairs bedroom, where his wife was standing before the mirror of the old-fashioned two-part dresser, re-coiling her little knot of hair.

They were elderly people. The minister was a spare, grey-haired man with mildly disappointed eyes, dressed with respectable ministerial shabbiness in a dark coat and trousers that did not match. His wife looked older. Her hair was white. Her face had an anxious, concerned, self-effacing look that had come from the uneasy knowledge that people were criticizing her. Her shoulders were bent, and she had a little dumpy figure. She was wearing a blue skirt and a blue silk waist with an edge of tatting around the collar.

Her face was drawn a little as if she were crying. The minister put his arm around her and said with false cheeriness: "Now, mamma, don't worry about this meeting. I don't think they'll mention anything except the redecorating."

"I'm afraid of John Shattuck," she articulated faintly.

"Oh, never mind about John Shattuck. He won't be here."

"No, but . . ."

"And anyway, what can John Shattuck say? We've done nothing."

"No, but that won't matter if he wants to get us out. They can always find something."

"What can he find, I'd like to know?"

"Well . . . he'll find something."

"Oh, well, they're not trying to get us out now. Don't worry about things until you come to them," he said stoutly. "You're tired out over all that cleaning and that makes you see the dark side of things."

She looked anxiously about.

"I wish I'd got the curtains washed," she murmured.

"Those men will never notice the curtains."

She hitched herself away from his arm and went into the sitting-room, where she took up her tatting and worked with nervous energy.

Mr. Noble went into the closet for his other coat, and stood there holding it, in the little dark, stuffy place among his wife's dresses.

He was worried about this thing himself. Something not quite open in the greetings of some of his members, vague hints let fall now and then, had warned him that things were "brewing." There was nothing definite. The only thing he really feared was that John Shattuck would come to the meeting to-night and make trouble. He wished that "mamma" need not have been here. She took things so to heart. But then, John Shattuck wouldn't come. And if he did, what could he find to say? He was firm in his conviction that he had done his best, so far as he knew how. Even if he had made enemies of the Woods and Shattucks.

His pastorate here had seemed to start so well. Grandview was a pretty, quiet little town of retired farmers up in the wooded limestone region of north-eastern Iowa, a pleasant place in which to end their journeyings. The church had seemed to be running smoothly. It was the strongest in town. But there were things under the surface. He might have taken warning by the fact that the last man had had to leave.

Even yet it was hard to figure out all the ins and outs of the trouble, which at first had been only "things going on," then "an element," then "a faction," and now was trembling on the verge of "a split." It was hard to say who was really at the bottom of it, the Shattucks or the "Woodses" or Mrs. Frary.

Mrs. Frary was generally blamed. She was a handsome, lively, capable woman, but a little too "gay" for Grandview. When the Nobles came, she was leading the singing in the Sunday School and conducting an orchestra, composed of three violins, a flute, the piano, and fearful toots from Edgar

Perrinjacket on the cornet. Mrs. Frary took with the young people. Mr. Noble had been delighted at these signs of life in the Sunday School. He and Mrs. Noble had liked Mrs. Frary at once—had praised her singing, the most fatal move they could have made, and had extolled her work in the Sunday School.

This had first alienated the Shattucks, and the Shattucks were the banker's family, the "main ones" in the church. It was some time before the Nobles had realized that there was anything wrong. They were gentle, kindly, unsuspicious people, who believed in home and foreign missions, and had a trusting yet puzzled faith in the Lord. They did not look for trouble. There had been hints, but everyone had been too cautious to come right out, as they said, and tell them. But finally, by troubled applications to George Wolverton and Mrs. Cady and other approachable souls, Mr. Noble had begun to be able to figure the thing out.

It seemed that when Mrs. Frary had first come to Grandview, she had been asked to sing in the Congregational choir. There had been rejoicing over thus getting ahead of the Methodists. This had offended Margaret Woods, who was the mainstay of the choir and had a half-trained voice given to whooping on the high notes, that she had no chance to use anywhere else.

But Mrs. Frary had been neither wise nor meek enough to sit back and let Margaret sing. Mrs. Frary was an active soul. She loved to be doing. She had sung joyfully whenever asked; and at first, while she was a novelty, this had been at all the town functions. Even then it was thought that she was "a little gay." But she was pretty, and had a voice, and she had her following.

Then it was rumoured that Homer Shattuck, the banker's son, the one real eligible in Grandview and prized accordingly, was paying too much attention to Mrs. Frary. It was observed that he always tried to be her partner at card parties of the younger set, and that she was often passing the bank at closing-time. He had called her by her first name,

and she a married woman. People had seen them walking out toward Lime Creek together. She was said to be creating trouble and leading Homer on.

Homer had been for four or five years half-way engaged to Margaret Woods, who was older than he; and his family was reported eager for the match, as it would unite the Woods and Shattuck interests in the bank and bring in the big Woods relationship. This had set Mrs. Shattuck and Miss Verna Shattuck, the social leaders of Grandview, bitterly against Mrs. Frary—who besides had clothes and an air not justified by her income. Then it was said that Nelson Fales, the real-estate man, was interested in Mrs. Frary. Nelson was known to be dissipated and to have “other women” in other towns. All the worse for Mrs. Frary. There were stories about her. She was said to be a bad influence for the young people. People began to join virtuously with the “Woodses” and the Shattucks to get her out of the church.

Into this tangle the poor Nobles had stepped, and by their innocent praise of Mrs. Frary had doomed themselves from the start. But they were such well-meaning, gentle people, anxious and conscientious in what they trustingly believed to be the “work of the Kingdom” that it was some time before anything could be actually urged against them. When the affair had come to a crisis, Mrs. Frary had appealed to them, to the fluttering consternation of Mrs. Noble, not to let her be forced out of the church and made a social outcast in Grandview. By this time they had learned that she was “gay.” But there was “something nice about her,” as Mrs. Noble said. And she had worked hard for the Sunday School.

Mr. Noble had believed that she was unjustly treated. He had gone about all day through the rain and slush, in his overshoes and his shabby bad-weather coat, to see his members, and to beg that Mrs. Frary be allowed to stay at least until something had been proved against her. He had urged that it would blow over. That she would see her mis-

takes. He had even gone, in his innocence, to the "Woodses" and the Shattucks. Then Mrs. Noble had given him a hot foot bath and put him to bed.

From this he could dimly trace how the trouble had grown. Mrs. Frary had had to leave. But he had always been particularly careful to be courteous to her on the street and to show that he respected her; had called upon her when she was ill as if she had still been one of his members; and when she had invited them to Thanksgiving dinner, as two elderly people whose children were far away, and who would have had to spend the day alone, they had talked it over and gone, in spite of Mrs. Noble's timid misgivings. All their members had big "relationships" and had not thought of them.

Then Mr. Noble further offended John Shattuck by making a speech in favour of a new school building, when John Shattuck, President of the School Board, had been opposed because of taxes. It was said that one day he had failed to speak to Mrs. Woods on the street. He had not called on the Metzler boy when he had jaundice, and had called on someone else. "The element" was working. The "Woodses" had declared that he was not preaching the gospel. They had "gone over to the Methodists." Others were threatening to follow. John Shattuck had suddenly stopped coming to church, although he had not withdrawn his subscription. The Annual Meeting had come. Homer Shattuck, who had not been to church since the day when he had stopped taking a girl home from the Christian Endeavour, but who was now very anxious to prove that he had never been interested in Mrs. Frary, had spoken. He had said that the church was falling behind on its finances and that the young people were dropping out. "The faction" was growing, some joining it because others did, a few because it was a way of getting in with the Shattucks.

There was an opposing element, of course. But it would never be so strong for as the other against. Besides Mr. Noble's best friends were not the influential ones. They

were the people whom the others never thought of—Grandma Phillips, who lived up above Miss Hunt's Millinery Store, the new members in the country, old Schwartz, the cabinet-maker, who was a reader; Miss McClintock, the first-grade teacher, who was alone in the world.

He did not see how he could have done otherwise. For himself he could stand it. It was what every minister had to go through at some time in his career. It was one of the sad and disappointing drawbacks to the "work of the Kingdom." There were always "some" in every church. In every church there came a time when it was "a good thing to get away" or "wise to make a change." Forty years of the ministry had taken the pride out of him. But it was for her—for "mamma." For her sake he must hang on.

He had promised her that this should be their last church. "Mamma" couldn't stand the moving any more, the tearing up and getting settled again. They would stay here until they had finished scraping together enough to keep them when he could no longer preach. He could see how hard she had worked to make a home of it. They had revarnished the floors themselves, as they always did, and cut over the curtains to fit the different windows, had one of their old carpets made over into a rug. She had embroidered a scarf for the dresser, made tatting to edge the parlour curtains, covered with flowered cretonne the box in which he kept his Sunday shirts, passepartouted the coloured reproductions of masterpieces from *The Ladies' Home Journal* to hang on the walls. She had worked almost as hard as over their first home, believing that this was to be their last.

And now they had found that she must have an operation. She must have a home. They must have somewhere she could rest, where Lura, their daughter, who was teaching in New Mexico, could come and care for her. At their son Arnold's they could not feel themselves welcome. Mamma would never be able to stand it there. He might not be able to pick up another church right away. The

churches were calling for younger men. It was not right that she should suffer for the personal jealousies of people whom she had never injured. He wondered what he could do. Perhaps it would be a good thing to speak to Wolverton, or to Alfred Bliss.

If anything should happen to-night . . . The trustees, with the exception of John Shattuck, were all good enough men taken separately, but together they might do anything. But then, George Wolverton would be here. Alfred Bliss had always seemed very friendly. Ira Cousins would do as the others did. He wished he had said something to one of them, to Alfred Bliss, about mamma.

He put on his coat in the dim-lit room, looking at the calm evening outside, at the bare rose-bush that tapped the window. He had taken great care of the rose-bush and hoped that it would bear plentifully this June. It would please Lura when she came, she was so fond of flowers, and had so little chance for any of her own.

2

He went into the sitting-room. They were nervous. Mrs. Noble kept knotting her thread and listening for the bell.

Ira Cousins was the first to come. He was a hardware merchant, a thin, dusty, nondescript-looking man who never had much to say. He took the straight-backed chair that stood next to the door, and refused to exchange it for another, although Mrs. Noble kept twittering: "I'm afraid you're not finding that very comfortable, Mr. Cousins."

"Nice spring weather we're having," Mr. Noble ventured.

"Yes. Pretty good."

Ira looked ill at ease, as if he had arrived too soon. The burden of a conversation was almost too much for him. They thought anxiously that it was just that, just Ira's way. He kept his eyes on the glass doors of the old-fashioned bookcase which contained the Nobles' library, apart from

the theological books in the study—sets of Dickens and George Eliot, books that Arnold and Lura had used in school, Tennyson, Cowper and Jean Ingelow in faded bindings, and a miscellaneous lot purchased from agents whom they had not been able to turn away, young fellows working their way through school, and poor spinsters supporting feeble mothers. Ira industriously studied their titles. When he had finished, he gazed at the photograph of Lura in cap and gown, and at the small framed picture of Mrs. Noble above the bookcase. It had been taken when she was a young woman. She had a small plump face with dimples and crimped hair, and a lace tucker ornamented with coquettish bows of ribbon.

Mrs. Noble said: "Is Vera better since she had her tonsils out?"

Ira slowly brought back his eyes. "Well . . . I don't know. She don't seem to be gaining much."

"You'll have to take her up to Rochester and let them have a look at her," Mr. Noble said.

"Yes. 'Spect it'll come to that."

Mrs. Noble tatted with nervous haste. When the door bell rang she jumped.

"Sit still, mam—Hester," Mr. Noble said hastily. "I'll go."

Alfred Bliss and Mr. Kemmerer came in on a flood of geniality. "How d'-do, how d'-do, Mrs. Noble? Nice evening. Fine weather. Don't know that I ever saw things looking better. No, no; keep your seat—keep your seat. Well, friend Ira, I see you got ahead of us."

Mrs. Noble's face grew hot and then pale when she saw that John Shattuck was not with them.

"Take this chair, Mr. Bliss," she said solicitously, drawing out the big imitation-leather rocker.

"Well, thank you—thank you. I don't know that I should—Brother Kemmerer, you'd better sit here."

"No, no. No, no. I'm very comfortable."

Alfred Bliss wiped his face that had a pale, luminous

glow. He was the chief lawyer in Grandview and had once served a term in the State House of Representatives—a small man with short legs and large head, dressed in a William Jennings Bryan style of black felt hat, negligent collar and tie, and coat open over his wrinkled vest. He had a round, pale, shining face, eyes beaming cordially behind spectacles, a little smattering of flossy grey hair and a little grey moustache sunken in above his round, smiling mouth. He was always very friendly and genial to everyone.

"Well, Mrs. Noble, I see you're hard at work," he said.

"Not real work—just a little fancy work," she apologized.

"Oh, yes, I know how that goes!" he cried with an effect of chivalrous raillery that made Mrs. Noble think: "He is a nice man!" "You're just like my wife. I never can get her to rest. Always has to be busy at something."

Mrs. Noble gave him a pale, grateful smile. "How is Mrs. Bliss?" she asked.

He became instantly mournful. "She isn't as well this spring as I'd like to see her, Mrs. Noble. I think I'll have to have Daisy or Arnette stay at home with her next winter. She misses them. She misses the girls, you know."

"Indeed I do know!" Mrs. Noble cried fervently, with a sudden rending pang for Lura.

"These cold winters are hard on everyone," Mr. Kemmerer stated.

"Yes, and she overdoes. She needs the girls," said Alfred Bliss.

"He's good to her," Mrs. Noble thought approvingly.

"I hear that your wife's mother is coming to make her home with you, Mr. Kemmerer."

"We've been trying to persuade her. But I don't know how it will be. She hates to give up her own home."

"Yes. Well, all these old people do," Alfred Bliss said sympathetically. "And you can't blame them."

"No, I didn't blame her. No."

Mrs. Noble looked surreptitiously at Mr. Kemmerer.

She did not quite know what to make of him. He had always been kind to them in his colourless way—as kind as “she” would let him be, perhaps. He was reverenced in Grandview as a remarkably intelligent man. He had once been a Superintendent of Schools. But the gradual withering up of his intellectual interests in the pursuit of a business career in Grandview, and the tyranny of a wife who was known as a “manager,” had given him a faded, strained, despondent look. To-night he seemed more dried up and mournful than ever.

But Alfred Bliss was in good spirits. Now that he had come, the restraint seemed to be lifted. An atmosphere of amiability spread from him as he sat in the big chair in which he could scarcely keep both feet on the floor—his face giving out a pale glow, and his eyes, as he took off his spectacles, blew on them, and wiped them with a large, crumpled handkerchief.

He asked genially: “Well, is it Brother Wolverton we’re waiting for?”

Mrs. Noble’s heart gave a throb. She looked at Mr. Noble. Now they need not worry about John Shattuck coming! The something that had been hanging over her all week lifted. She felt relieved and suddenly light-hearted. She gave a little flustered laugh.

“I suppose George is pretty busy these days,” Alfred Bliss went on. “He can’t let go of the farm, you know.”

“No, pretty hard for any of these old farmers to do that.”

They heard George Wolverton at the door. They knew his walk, and the way he always scraped his shoes on the edge of the step before he came in. The Nobles greeted him warmly. “Come in, Mr. Wolverton. Oh, don’t bother about your shoes. Sit here, Mr. Wolverton. How is Mrs. Wolverton? I want you to thank her for the gingerbread.”

George Wolverton sat down heavily, breathing a little hard. He was a short, stocky farmer with a thick, reddened face and a strong outcropping of dark-brown beard. When the Nobles had first come to Grandview he and his wife had

still been living in the country. Mr. Noble had been called upon to "bury" their daughter. They had never forgotten his sermon then. Ever since, they had showed their friendliness in a thousand ways. They had had the Nobles out to the farm, and, since they had moved into town, had still been eager to show them kindness. Especially Mrs. Wolverton, of whom people said that she was one of the best women in the world, pure goodness. She had always been doing something for them, it seemed. Just to-day she had sent over a plate of fresh gingerbread warm from her oven.

"Well, George, how's the farm coming?"

"Oh . . . I ain't been out to the farm to-day."

"Haven't?"

"No. I ain't been feeling just right. Didn't know as I'd get over here to-night."

"You're trying to do too much, Mr. Wolverton. You ought to take it easier now that you've moved into town," Mrs. Noble said anxiously.

"Oh . . . well, I don't know," he mumbled, turning redder.

No one spoke for a time.

"Well, I'll leave you gentlemen to your work," Mrs. Noble fluttered.

She slipped into the kitchen, where, after wandering softly and restlessly about, she sat down in the old chair by the window. It was one that she and Mr. Noble had bought when they had first started housekeeping. It had gone on all their wanderings with them and stood in many kitchens. She looked out at the pale evening sky patterned by the thin twigs of the lilac-bush.

She kept wondering whether George Wolverton had not acted a little strange. But then, he had said that he wasn't feeling well.

It did not seem to her that she could stand it if they should have to tear things up and move again just as the place was becoming a home. She thought of the long years they had had, the changes they had made—from town to

town, county to county. All the flowers and the bushes they had planted, and then left before the blossoms came. Sometimes she had a cold strange doubt of the work of the Kingdom. Mr. Noble made light of things. But she could tell. She was living in a kind of constant dread. She did not see how anyone could find a thing to bring against Mr. Noble. "But if they really want to, they'll find something," she thought. No one could drive John Shattuck out of his place in the bank when he made shady deals and struck hard bargains, as everyone knew that he did. Why should they owe their home and their living to the personal feelings of John Shattuck? Every time it grew harder to move. The old kitchen cabinet, the gasolene stove, the geraniums on the window-sill—they were fitted and placed. She could not endure to go through it all again.

Not now. She grew hot when she thought of the ordeal before her. What if this were taken away from her? Where could she go? Arnold might want her, but Bessie . . . Mr. Noble might get another church. But to go to a new place, a bare house again, strangers about . . .

The voices sounded quiet, with a soothing murmur from Alfred Bliss. But whenever they grew louder she listened and held her breath.

3

The five men were left in the old-fashioned sitting-room which had been repapered when the Nobles came, and the woodwork varnished. It was an old house which the church had been able to buy at a good figure when the Old Lady Pettibone died. Any other setting would have been too gay for the Nobles' household goods which for forty years had been freighted about over Iowa.

They were all acting, at least, as if this were simply a usual meeting—as surely it was.

"I suppose we'd better get through our business," Alfred

Bliss said amiably. "Now, Reverend—I think you're the one to talk on this redecorating proposition. I believe the ladies have spoken to you about it. Suppose you put it up to us."

The redecorating proposition was one that annually came up in the Grandview church, and of which it was annually said: "This year we simply must do something about it." The auditorium, which had long been tinted a dim, sad green, with two pillars painted on the wall behind the pulpit, and with fraying strips of red ingrain down the aisles, must be done over. But there were always reasons for putting it off. Taxes to pay, they had fallen behind on their apportionment, they might have a new church some day.

Mr. Noble was eager to have something accomplished this time. It would be a kind of justification of his pastorate. Not like building a new church, of course. But it was a notorious fact among the ministry that the man who built the church would have to go and his successor reap the glory. This would be something done, something to point to and say, "I urged the church to redecorate." He was ashamed of the building. Sometimes he thought: What must Jesus think of him when He saw His house so neglected? But he could not urge it as he wished. He felt too uncertain as things were. All he could say was that the ladies wanted it done. They were ready to undertake to raise half the expenses if the trustees would guarantee the other half.

The men listened gravely in their character of trustee, which they had put on as soon as business was mentioned—Mr. Kemmerer judiciously raising objections in a slightly peevish tone, Alfred Bliss with a good word for everything but not committing himself, Ira Cousins very anxious on the subject of expense, George Wolverton dumb. They were cautious. There were a good many expenses. Repairs on the parsonage—they looked meaningly at the wall-paper—

and the kitchen range in the church basement needed fixing. So Brother Wolverton had said.

"Yes, I guess it does," Mr. Wolverton admitted. "She" said she had an awful time making it go the last time there was a church supper there. Still, I don't know, that front room looks pretty bad."

Mr. Noble warmed at this mark of loyalty on the part of George Wolverton. Somehow he had expected more opposition than was shown, although it could not be said that anything was actually accomplished. It was decided that a committee be appointed to look into the matter and report at the next prayer meeting or "as soon after as seemed advisable." Still, he felt relieved.

Mrs. Noble could tell by the sound of the voices that business was over. She was more than relieved—happy and a little flustered. How silly she had been to go imagining things again! Who could have been pleasanter than Alfred Bliss had been? She thought: "I believe I will pass around those pecans." They were some that her brother's people had sent her from Florida, and she had not yet had a chance to have anyone share them with herself and Mr. Noble. Since this trouble in the church, the ladies did not seem to "drop in" as they used to do in Morning Sun, where she had had such good friends and been so happy. She hastily got down the nut bowl from the top shelf of the cupboard and went bustling and smiling into the sitting-room. There was nothing she enjoyed more than to play the part of hostess.

"I thought that perhaps you gentlemen would like a few of these nuts my brother's family sent me from Florida. Perhaps they will refresh you after your labours."

She started, smiling, to hand the little burnt-wood bowls that Lura had made in the days of pyrography. Alfred Bliss interrupted with a bland majestic wave of his hand.

"Just a moment, please, Mrs. Noble. There's another matter I feel we ought to touch upon before this meeting closes."

Mr. Kemmerer gave a jerk and looked hastily at his watch.

Mrs. Noble slowly put down the bowl of nuts on the table and sat down, looking affrightedly from one to another. A pulse beat in her little wrinkled throat.

George Wolverton looked at the floor and turned crimson.

"Now, as you noticed," Alfred Bliss went on, with a vague sting under the suavity of his tone, "things haven't been running quite as smoothly as we'd like to see them in the church." He lifted one hand and studied each of the fingers. "Now I fear there devolves upon me a very unpleasant duty."

There was an embarrassed, throbbing silence in which they suddenly heard a little sharp twittering from a bird outside.

"Duty," Alfred Bliss repeated thoughtfully. "Now I believe," he went on in a louder tone, "that I have my finger upon the pulse of the church. I believe I understand its sentiment. I believe I am speaking for others beside myself—and this body."

George Wolverton shuffled suddenly.

"Now as to the cause. The church has a leader. The welfare of the church centres about its pastor."

Mrs. Noble broke in suddenly and tremulously: "I know that Mr. Noble has done all that he could. But there were others. Things were not right from the start."

"Yes, Mrs. Noble," Alfred Bliss said, smiling gently, "that may all be. But instead of healing the breach like a wise physician, which was his duty under the circumstances, Mr.—the pastor in this case—has only widened it, I fear."

Mrs. Noble reached tremblingly for her handkerchief. She could hardly believe that this was Alfred Bliss speaking. There was something steely under the pale glow of his eyes.

"Now there has been a little sentiment—a little trouble—but nothing which a man who was truly looking for the welfare of the institution which he served, might not have quietly smoothed over." He paused again, and the Nobles

sat quite still, waiting with fear and yet wonder for what might be coming—Mrs. Noble tearful, her eyes fixed on Alfred Bliss' face, Mr. Noble looking down at his hands. "There was—a presence—in this church"—he spoke with intense solemnity; all the men turned red—"which was not a good influence upon such a body. Now, a wise physician, I believe, would have removed that presence firmly and quietly." He took off his glasses, stared at them—put them on and smiled. "This was not done. As to why it was not done, I regret to say that there have been rumours touching the pastor and the lady in question."

The men were all still and would not look at one another. Mrs. Noble suddenly gasped—did he mean that Mr. Noble . . . ? She looked at him in terror, at his spare elderly figure and faded, indignant eyes. Mr. Noble. . . . If they had said that he did not preach the gospel, she could have understood it, although she would have indignantly denied it. That she would have expected, at a time like this. But this! Never in all these years . . . Her timid, decorous soul grew hot with horror. She had known that they would find something—but who would ever have dreamed of this?

Mr. Kemmerer gave a vague, remonstrating grumble.

Alfred Bliss continued smoothly: "Such things have been said. And from reliable sources. Bad things to have said about the pastor and spiritual leader of a church."

Mr. Noble cleared his throat. His thin cheeks were flushed. In the mild innocence that he had never outgrown, he had not counted upon such a viewpoint as this. He had been prepared to face doctrinal charges—a haziness concerning the Millennium, too little talk of the Second Coming, too little stress upon the Atonement and the Blood of the Lamb—but he was at a loss with this. He thought of Jesus and Mary Magdalene . . . but Mrs. Frary was not a Magdalene! He was not going to say that she was. Perhaps she was "a little gay." Mrs. Noble had wondered

more than once if she didn't use "a little something" on her cheeks, which were almost too pretty to be natural, she felt, for a married woman and housekeeper. But he remembered how kind she had been to them on Thanksgiving Day. He thought boldly that there were worse things than being "gay." Well, suppose she had danced with travelling men?

"Why, I—I think it hardly necessary for me to deny such a—a situation," he said stiffly. "I am surprised that such an interpretation could be taken."

"At least," Alfred Bliss cut in suavely, "there was an amount of interest shown which was very unwise."

"I took a friendly interest—" Mr. Noble began indignantly.

"Exactly. Very unwise. It wounded some who should have been considered. This was at the very least—injudicious."

No one seemed able to break the embarrassed silence. Alfred Bliss remained smiling meditatively. Mrs. Noble sat with her head bent over her fingers that were working tremulously in her lap.

Mr. Noble raised his head and attempted to speak out of the daze that enfolded him. But it was only dutifully, without conviction, as if he felt the hopelessness of his cause. "I explained at the time my objections to the lady being ejected from the church. I believed that she was not shown justice, and that she was a useful member. Any other interpretation—"

"You have called upon her since, I understand."

"I have," he said stiffly. "Mrs. Noble and I have both continued friendly relations with—with the lady."

"I have always been with Mr. Noble," Mrs. Noble spoke up quaveringly, "except once when I was not well enough to go. But I do not see how anyone could say such a thing of Mr. Noble." She sobbed.

"I am very sorry that you should have to hear these

things, Mrs. Noble," Alfred Bliss said with majestic patronage.

"It isn't that I should hear them. It's that they should be said. And by those whom we believed—"

"Now you understand that I am quoting from general opinion," Alfred Bliss said hastily. "I am speaking for the church as a body."

"I do not believe that the church as a body could ever believe such things of Mr. Noble," Mrs. Noble asserted proudly, with a quavering voice.

Alfred Bliss dismissed the matter with a slight wave of the hand. "But there is another point. Objection is taken in many quarters to the pastor's interpretation of the Scriptures. Now, liberality is a very good thing in its way, no one is a greater believer in a certain amount of liberty than myself, but it can be so infu-u-used into the discourse as not to wound the beliefs of the older members of the congregation. We have lost some of our best members on this ground," he continued dolefully. "The church cannot afford to lose many such supporters as Amos Woods."

Mr. Noble began to feel upon familiar ground.

"A pastor must preach the truth as it is given him to see it," he began firmly.

Alfred Bliss did not give him time to go on.

"Then there is this point," he said hastily. "There has been complaint on the part of some of the younger members ["Homer Shattuck!"] Mrs. Noble thought with a frightened pang. "I knew it. I never trusted him." Other things went hastily through her mind—Homer Shattuck and Mrs. Frary, Mrs. Frary laughing once about "the divine Homer" . . .]—a complaint that the young people are falling out. In fact, it has been felt that a younger man was needed to put new blood into the institution."

Mrs. Noble trembled. Mr. Noble said: "As to that, I cannot judge. But I will say that I came to this church—Mrs. Noble and I—to give it the best of our endeavours—and further the work of the Kingdom in this community.

In whatever I have done I have followed to the best of my ability the dictates of my conscience. I believe that the church should give me a chance to prove that this is true. I believe that the company of God's children can only defile itself by listening to such idle and malicious slander."

He said this firmly. Mrs. Noble listened with fearful worship to his eloquence and boldness. There was a depreciating murmur.

"It is more for Mrs. Noble's sake than my own," he continued somewhat unsteadily. "This is very hard upon Mrs. Noble. It comes at such a time . . . I should feel the cruelty of a removal at such a time and under such a pretext."

The other men stirred uneasily.

Alfred Bliss continued blandly after a moment. "I feel for the pastor's sentiments. I am sure that we all entertain great sympathy for Mrs. Noble. Personally we may deplore . . . but the good of the church . . . The church is woefully divided. These rumours that I believed it my duty to touch upon, whether they may or may not have foundation, do the church harm. Its leader must be stainless. I fear that it will never be united under its present leadership," he ended mournfully.

Mrs. Noble gave a sudden piteous glance at the other men. George Wolverton was still staring at the floor, his face a dark red. Ira Cousins was scraping his chin with his forefinger. Mr. Kemmerer kept a gloomy and longing look upon the door. Surely one of them would speak.

"Well, of course," Ira Cousins said suddenly, "Shattucks and Woodses are awful heavy payers. It's hard on the church to lose their subscriptions."

Alfred Bliss looked dignified.

Mr. Kemmerer hitched himself up and said reluctantly: "I don't agree with all that has been said. But I believe the welfare of the church must be considered. . . ." His voice trailed off, then he gave another hitch and shot out

resolutely: "Personally I do not fall in with these aspersions on the pastor's character. But of course the church demands . . ."

"Exactly, exactly," Alfred Bliss said. He made a slight solemn pause, then went on: "Now I think that I am speaking the general sentiment, through the trustees, when I say that it would be the wisest act for the pastor to tender his resignation. I think we are quite willing to put it in that way." Mr. Noble did not look up. "Or it will be the duty of the church to call a meeting, and the discussion would be of an unpleasant nature. I would avoid that—for Mrs. Noble's sake."

Mrs. Noble looked slowly up from her trembling fingers. There was nothing to be hoped from Mr. Kemmerer—he was fidgeting with his watch, only anxious to be out of it all. Nor from Ira Cousins. He would go as the rest went. There was only George Wolverton. She remembered all his kindness—the times he had come for them from the farm in his old shabby car, and how when he had taken them home he had loaded the back with apples. Always so generous and so good. His hard, significant grip of the hand the day his little girl was buried, when Mr. Noble had tried so hard to make it all easier for them. But here was something even more powerful than that. He sat breathing hard, and flushed, studying his fingers, distressed and embarrassed but never looking up.

They had known of this, all of them. George Wolverton had known. That was why he had come so late and acted so strange. "She" had known. That was why she had sent the gingerbread. It was all that she could do.

"Yes. Very well," Mr. Noble said in a small voice. "I will tender my resignation."

Alfred Bliss rose, courteous and effusive with consciousness of duty performed, brushing the neglected bowl of pecans with his coat as he passed the table. He spoke of the night: "Beautiful night. Fine moon. Clear as a bell." Ira Cousins shamefacedly followed him. Mr. Kemmerer,

with an embarrassed look, pressed Mrs. Noble's fingers and murmured: "I hope you do not think there is anything personal. Charges absurd, of course. But you know there are some that are determined, and then you understand that it's no use. . . . You must let me drive you and Mr. Noble out in my car once more." She returned the pressure wanly. George Wolverton waited, uneasily fingering his brown felt hat.

"Well, I'm awfully sorry it had to come to this," he muttered. He felt a dim reproach in their eyes. "But it's no use saying a word when Bliss and Shattuck and them gets started. It was just the same with the last man—wasn't anything against him as far as I could see."

"But such terrible things to say about Mr. Noble! We never dreamed—" Mrs. Noble quavered.

"It was simply a pretext," Mr. Noble asserted.

"Oh, sure. Oh, no one'll really believe all that. Still, when things gets talked around—" George Wolverton finished vaguely.

"They were determined to get me out, and there was nothing—"

"Oh, sure. I guess that's so. 'Course you know we folks don't take any stock in that. 'Course, she's—well, she's kind o' gay, but then . . . 'She's' real het about it. But I told her it didn't do no good."

"And to think it should have been Mr. Bliss!" Mrs. Noble said.

"Oh, Bliss! I'd rather deal with Shattuck any day than him. Yeh, he's smooth, Bliss is. Well, I guess he's a politician. Sure, he's been one of the worst ones. Him and Shattuck are right in together. You know he's got stock in the bank, Bliss has. Or it's his wife that has, I guess. But then it's the same thing. Yeh, he's a politician," George Wolverton repeated, with pride and satisfaction in the definition. "Well . . . I guess 'she' 'll be in to-morrow. 'She' wants you folks to take dinner with us some day soon. Well . . . awful sorry it had to come to this. Good night."

They let him out of the door, then turned back to the room that held their worn household goods. Even yet they did not half understand the blow that had fallen. They had no strength to struggle or even talk.

"I thought he was a friend at least," Mrs. Noble murmured bitterly.

"I suppose he's like the rest," Mr. Noble said wearily. "Their interests are all tied up together."

"He might have stood up for you when Alfred Bliss was saying those wicked things," she asserted.

He did not answer. Dazed images of Mrs. Frary, handsome, active, smiling, came before him. He thought of his staid worried ministerial calls upon her. The absurdity of the whole thing confounded him. Himself and Mrs. Frary—that it should be possible!

His wife felt his silence. Perhaps it was in the minds of both of them that the Lord had "forgotten" them, that He had not looked after His own. But they were too weary to complain, to even think about it. There were things that touched them more closely.

"Why should we have to leave our home for them?" she demanded. "Why should people like that always have it to say?"

He did not answer.

She began to cry weakly. He put his arm around her.

"Mamma, don't take it that way. We'll get along."

"I told you they'd find something," she sobbed. "I had a feeling." She put her head against his shoulder and moaned: "Our last place. To be driven out of it like this—just because a few people were offended! What have we been working for all our lives? . . . I thought Alfred Bliss was such a good man. He always talked so nice about his wife. He was working against us all the time he was so pleasant."

He kept patting her shoulder consolingly, although his

mouth was twisted wryly under the drooping grey moustache.

After a while she murmured: "Now, I'll have nowhere to go."

He roused himself to cheer her. "Yes, you have. There's Arnold——"

"Oh, no. You know Bessie's never been friendly. I couldn't bear to go there and be a burden."

"We'll have a new place by then," he said valiantly.

She moaned: "It doesn't seem as if I could stand it starting in a new place and having it all to go through with again. Besides, they'd hear of this and be opposed to you. And we're getting old. . . . I'd better not have my operation. What does it matter? And there'll be no salary . . ."

"Yes, you will! We're not beggars yet!" he cried stoutly. "If I shouldn't get a church right away, there are other things. I'll find something." He thought vaguely of insurance, being an agent for something. . . . "Don't you worry, mamma. I've always taken care of you and I always will."

"Yes, but . . . and there's our old age. I wanted Lura," she sobbed.

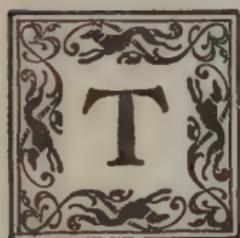
"You're going to have Lura," he asserted.

She shook her head. "I won't get over it."

They locked the doors again, turned out the lights, and went to bed. The rose-bush whose blossoms Lura would not see tapped desolately against the bedroom window. The old bed creaked as if protesting against the pain of another journey.

An Investment for the Future.

1



HEY were staying not in a hotel but in a private rooming-house—a white house, as most of them were in Mobile, slightly dilapidated, with a long airy central passage. They took most of their meals down town at restaurants that looked from the outside as if they would not be too high-priced.

The car drove up for them. The landlady had been rocking in the passage, talking to another black-haired woman in a low interminable murmur of slurred Southern speech. She knocked on their door.

“Mistuh Albright! Missis Albright! Somebody aout heah fo’ you-all!”

“Oh, yes—thank you! We’ll be out in just a minute.”

A flurrying about, hasty but subdued. The Albrights came out, going past the two women, smiling in the constrained secretive way of provincial people among strangers. Mrs. Albright said shyly: “Good-bye”; and Mr. Albright echoed her hastily: “Good-bye, good-bye.”

“Good mawnin’. Hope you-all have a nice ride.”

“Thank you. I’m sure we will.”

They had kept strictly in their own room when they were not at meals or out with Mr. Ballentyne. They had eaten lunches there—oranges and crackers and cookies, brought back from town in paper sacks, furtively, because they had not known how “she” might like it. They had decided that it would be better not to tell the landlady anything about

this business of theirs, and she had thought that they were rather queer and hard to get acquainted with, like all Northerners—Yankees.

The eyes of the two women followed them as they went out to the car. The women seemed always to be sitting there, in loose half-soiled apron dresses, watching and rocking in the passage through which drifted a breeze and a faint scent of overblown white roses.

Mr. Ballentyne leaned out of the car and called jovially: "Ready for a drive this mawnin'?"

They smiled in response, flattered, and yet with reserve, because they were not going to "say anything" until they had seen the land. Mr. Albright answered, with his slight touch of precision:

"Yes, indeed. We're ready, all ready."

"Fine! Then we're off—off to Wild Bird."

Mr. Ballentyne tossed away his cigar and started the engine. Mrs. Albright thought that he smoked too much, but in spite of that he seemed like a very nice man. At first his cordiality, his lavishness with money, had worried her. But she thought that this must be "Southern hospitality" and had been gradually won and flattered. He seemed to like them both so well, to think so much of their value as settlers on the land. He treated them, they felt, not just like people met in a business way. He called Mr. Albright "Doc-tuh," and this pleased them, although Mrs. Albright had felt it necessary to protest that Mr. Albright was "not D.D." Mr. Ballentyne had confided that he was not much of a church-goer—well, he had let himself get out of the habit of it the last few years, you know a man lets himself get lax; but his wife and daughters were members of the Episcopalian church and he "believed in the churches." Mrs. Albright had urged him not to let his wife do the church-going for him, that the church needed men; and he had said that he meant to start going regularly again, there was no question but it was the thing to do.

Mrs. Albright had wondered about Mr. Ballentyne's wife

and daughters—what they were like. She had thought that perhaps he would bring them along, but it seemed that she and Mr. Albright were not going to meet them. She always inquired after Mrs. Ballentyne.

Mr. and Mrs. Albright settled themselves in the back seat, self-conscious, but with an ingenuous pride. They liked to have the big seven-passenger car drive up to their rooming-house for them. The gratified look on their faces showed how they enjoyed the smooth motion that was pleasantly familiar to them now. They had unconsciously taken on a look of dignified aristocracy as they drove about the city.

They had bought new clothes to come South, and a new brown bag. This was the first real trip that they had made in years, and Mr. Albright especially was determined to "do the thing right." He had made Mrs. Albright go to Fall Rapids and buy a ready-made black crêpe dress, that she had altered later herself by putting in a little net yoke and high collar. He himself had worn his next-best black suit that he sometimes wore in the pulpit on Sunday evenings, and a new Panama hat. They had been glad to have these things when they had gone to that fine hotel for dinner with Mr. Ballentyne. How would Mrs. Albright have felt if she had had only her black skirt and silk waist! But she was wearing the skirt and waist to-day, because they were going out into the country and it might rain. She had put on a tatting collar and the black hat with cherries that she had got with a view toward travelling. Her hands were perspiring in their new tan silk gloves. She must remember not to take hold of the rod of the car because it "came off" on her gloves. She did hope the roads were good. She was afraid of these fearful hills and bumps.

Mr. Albright sat grasping the rod, looking brightly and eagerly about with blue eyes slightly faded behind their rimmed glasses. His thin face was sunburned and his thick grey hair was damp under his Panama hat—Mrs. Albright did wish they had brought his old straw hat along; this was too good for going out to the country. He had said reck-

lessly: "Well, mamma, suppose something does happen to it!" He was not going to worry about hats to-day.

Mr. Ballentyne was taking them out that same street, remembering how Mrs. Albright liked the old white galleried houses. They were like the Southern houses in novels. Mr. and Mrs. Albright both were watching eagerly, Mrs. Albright still a little timorous, but he sitting upright and elated, taking off his Panama hat now and then to let the breeze from the Gulf stir his heavy damp hair.

2

They had talked it over again last night, and again Mr. Albright had conquered all mamma's little fears that always cropped up when he once thought that a thing was decided for good and all. It was not too late to draw back. She had heard of people who had bought land in the South and when they had gone down there had found it was all under water.

"Yes, but, mamma, we're going to see ours. If it's under water, we'll know it when we see it, won't we?"

It was really her liking for Mr. Ballentyne that won her. She felt that they ought not to let him do so much for them if they intended to go back on their investment—just as she could not understand those women who let a clerk show them one piece of goods after another when they didn't intend to take a thing. And she would not have kept Mr. Albright from buying, anyhow. She would only have demurred, drawn back, urged him to be cautious, as she did when he was going out in a row-boat or hitching up a horse or doing other dangerous things. Papa was of course the business head of the family.

Mr. Albright thought, with proud satisfaction in the novelty of using business terms, that he was "making a good investment." It was A. B. Goodman, a hardware merchant in Bloomfield and a member of his church, who had put him on to it—another phrase he had never used before. A. B.

had bought land in the South. He had been there and brought back a little bag of specimens that he proudly displayed to neighbours—pecan nuts, Japanese oranges, castor-oil beans, varieties of soil in little glass bottles. A. B. was enthusiastic over the country. Think of picking roses in February! A. B. wanted to dispose of the hardware business and go right down there. His own nephew was connected with the company. There could not be a mistake.

The Albrights did not remember just how it had all come about. From taking supper at the Goodmans', getting confidential after talking about the Petersons, being shown the specimens—"Now I wouldn't show these to everyone, Reverend, but I know you have an interest in a little of the world beyond Bloomfield." They had pretended that their interest was all for Helen and Emmett. Helen's husband, a school principal in a small Wisconsin town, had poor health. A. B. declared that the Southern climate would cure him. "Tell you—I'll just have my nephew step around and see you some time!" And here had come the nephew from Chicago, with his hair slicked back and all the statistics on his tongue. He had wormed it out of them at once that they had some money uninvested. They had decided to make the trip. They had acted, they felt, with intense caution. It was not like that newfangled corn-shredder company into which Mr. Albright's brother had sunk their first savings years ago. Mr. Albright had asked the librarian for books on the South. They were going to see for themselves.

Now they would not tell even Mr. Ballentyne that they were "thinking favourably" until they had looked at the land.

Mr. Ballentyne turned around and smiled at them, with a glimpse of white teeth in his dark soft-featured face with small, genial, dark-brown eyes.

"Mobile must be gettin' to look familiar to you-all."

"You've shown us around a great deal, Mr. Ballentyne.

Mr. Albright and I certainly appreciate it, but we feel as if we've taken so much of your time——”

He waved that aside. “Glad to, glad to.”

It had been the same during their whole trip. Just as Mr. Hutchins in Chicago had told them, it had turned out to be more of a holiday than a business trip—only they would have something to show for it when they got home. That young nephew of A. B.’s had been so approving when they had made up their minds to go. “Fine, fine! Well, folks, whether you decide to buy or not—although there’s no doubt in my mind what you’ll do when you see that forty—you’ll have the finest little trip you ever took in your lives.” Mr. Hutchins, at the office in Chicago, had told them the same thing. Plump, rosy, well-groomed, in a fashionable grey suit, turning from his stenographer to hold out a warm hearty hand to them, crying: “Well, well! So here are these people Mr. Goodman’s been telling me about! Going to have a splendid trip South. Just wish I had the time to go with you. Great country—it’s the country of the future. But Mr. Ballentyne down there will look out for you.” And sure enough, when they got off the train at Mobile, there had been Mr. Ballentyne with the car to meet them. “Doc-tuh Albright? I thought so. Ballentyne. You’ve heard of me.” They hadn’t been able to keep him from picking up their bag and leading them to the car.

Now he said: “Did you-all go daown to the wharves last evenin’?”

They told him yes, they had seen Mobile Bay—like the song. Mr. Albright grew enthusiastic about it. It had been a wonderful sight to watch those Negroes loading up great bales of cotton, to think of all the countries to which those products might be going. It made a man consider the resources of this great country. Mrs. Albright wanted to know what those pretty purplish flowers were called. “Water hyacinths”—they must be Southern flowers. She wondered if they would grow at home. She’d like to take

a specimen, anyway. She told Mr. Ballentyne about her book in which she had pressed specimens of the flowers of all regions—an edelweiss that Professor Dixon had sent her from Switzerland, and even some flowers from the Holy Land.

"You shall have yo' specimen," Mr. Ballentyne declared.

"Oh, well now, I don't want to put you to any trouble."

"Don't worry about that, Mrs. Albright. I'll get it for you if I have to swim aout fo' it."

She sat back, flattered and gratified. He had been so good about stopping the car and had insisted on getting out himself and picking things for her—new flowers, a leaf of scrub palmetto which she wanted to make into a fan for little Verleen Johnson, a leaf from an orange-tree, Spanish moss. It had been half the pleasure of the journey for her.

"Mrs. Albright's great on flowers," Mr. Albright explained.

"So I see! Well, Mrs. Albright, when you-all come to live in the Saouth, you can have them all the yeah raound."

She would show the ladies at home and perhaps send a root of something to Helen. Mr. Albright was full of interest too—what he believed to be a strictly philosophical and scientific interest—in all these new things.

Mr. Ballentyne had told them to go down to the wharves yesterday. He had planned interesting things for them to do when he was too busy to take them out. He had told Mrs. Albright just what stores to go to for a little present for Helen. It had been a wonderful trip! Now, as they spun along the road, dreamily contented with the smoothness of the motion, their minds were full of it.

There had been the journey from Chicago through northern Alabama—great wooded hills, with little cabins in the hollows; then a big, rolling run-down country, with everything gone to seed, miserable little corn and cotton patches, unpainted shanties set up on stilts in dismal plots of ground, flimsy houses painted dark red and green, little villages with ratty-looking, sharp-snouted pigs running through the

streets, rivers like liquid yellow mud. Mrs. Albright had exclaimed in dismay: "If this is what the South is like, we'd better have stayed at home!" She was horrified at the haphazardness of the towns after the trim, staid neatness of Bloomfield, with its population of retired farmers. Imagine people at home letting even one pig run loose through the streets—it would cause a scandal! But Mr. Albright had been interested in everything. "You must have vision, mamma," he said. "You must see what can be made of this country." And, really dismayed too, he had thought of themselves as crusading Northerners come in—as Mr. Hutchins had said—"to show enterprise to the South."

As they neared the coast, Mrs. Albright, too, had grown excited at seeing with her own eyes such an exotic thing as the Gulf of Mexico. She had stopped worrying over the expense of the journey—trying to persuade Mr. Albright that he could wait just as well, stop off and get a bag of cookies somewhere, when he was hungry and wanted grandly to go to the diner; and then ordering only a vegetable and wanting to share his meat with him. They saw the Southern pines—tall, slim-stemmed, tufted at the tops like giant feather dusters. The white oyster-shell roads through the green live-oaks. Mobile, with its queer old-fashioned streets. They had stopped before flat-faced buildings of faded stucco, green and cream and blue, with green-painted balconies hanging askew like frayed ancient lace. Mr. Albright had kept exclaiming: "This is romantic, mamma! I'd like to paint a picture of this." Both had cried: "I wish we had Helen with us!" There was a square with live-oaks and old fountains, where all day long some little locust things were shrilling.

Mr. Albright had taken the *National Geographic* off and on for years, whenever he could afford it. But during his vacations they had gone to visit relatives, either his or his wife's, and of late years to see Helen. There had been so much to take his money, and his salary had always been small. He had had his training only at a little country

seminary, and had held small churches. There had been the two children to educate, and then Lawrence's long illness and death.

But now he was actually travelling! The boyishness that unworldly men preserve, that underlay all his little ministerial precisions, cropped up in the delighted interest with which he tried to observe every new variety of soil. He had been getting tired, almost discouraged. He had been preaching so long, and preaching seemed to amount to so little these days. What the people seemed to want now was a business manager who could lead the Boy Scouts. Now he felt that he was gaining information, enlarging his viewpoint. Themes for new sermons such as he had not preached for years came into his mind. At last he had seen the ocean!

The heart had long ago gone out of his work. But here was something into which he could put all that remained of that fire of purpose that years ago had sent him, a poor boy with his way to make, into the ministry to "do good to all men." He could believe in the future of the South. He would not be living out his last days in a small, minute death of economy as he had seen so many old people doing. His thin sunburned face, under the heavy grey hair, was eagerly alert.

3

They had driven about mostly in the city. This was a great, hot, flat country—red roads, blue sky, rough stretches of fields. Mrs. Albright forgot her gloves and clung to the rod as Mr. Ballentyne swung the car around the curves, turning to speak to them with a reassuring glow of his dark-brown eyes.

"These roads are all goin' to be changed when we get a few enterprisin' people in heah!"

Mrs. Albright saw with amazement that the soil seemed to be pinkish! She had always supposed that dirt was simply dirt-colour. Mr. Albright explained about the min-

erals, but she did not quite take that in. How queer it would be, she was thinking, to have a house built on pink soil—not substantial, not suitable, much too gay. She and papa starting out in their old age to build a home on pink ground! The recklessness of the whole undertaking overwhelmed her.

The landscape was strangely unkempt after their own huge country of cultivated fields. Mrs. Albright wondered when the real South would begin—the South of the Civil War novels where the heroine was Southern and the hero Northern; of songs sung by young people on porches in the evening; white mansions and white cottages wreathed in jasmine, black mammies in white turbans, Southern belles and beauties, and colonels with wide-brimmed hats and goatees drinking juleps. Most of the houses were those frail little things set upon stilts. They were like the summer cottages in the park near Fall Rapids.

They were getting into Wild Bird. Mr. Ballentyne turned.

"We're almost to Wild Bird. It's nearly ten o'clock. Say that we take two hours to look at the land, and then get back heah and see if they can't give us something at the hotel."

They demurred at his ordering another meal for them, but his careless assumption of mastery silenced them. They drove into the little town and he got out at the hotel, a large frame building with one of those long central passages.

There was about the place an air at once fresh and forlorn—the air of the South. In all the careless sweetness a dark tinge of dilapidation could be felt. The grass grew long and frowzy in the yards enclosed in dingy picket fences—Southern grass, thin, shallow-rooted. Rose-bushes scattered white petals. The long straight lines of the railroad flashed across the white sand.

They looked about silently.

"I don't see but two stores, papa," Mrs. Albright whispered.

"There's surely more than that," he answered confidently. "Or there will be. You must remember, mamma, this country is just opening up."

"That one seems to be a kind of post office and the other one a general store, like Hanson's at home. But Hanson's is bigger."

"You mustn't expect a big store right away. Wait until more people come. . . . That must be a banana-tree over there. I must get out and have a look at that. Don't you want to come?"

"No, I believe I'll sit in the car. Save my feet," she murmured.

He went tottering off to see the banana-tree. She sat alone in the big car—a small, neat, elderly, Middle-Western figure, in her black skirt and prim hat with the cherries. Once more, with Mr. Ballentyne's warm, encouraging look eclipsed, it seemed a dangerous venture. These people did not seem to mow their lawns. What kind of people could they be? She was not sure but that she was afraid to live among darkies. Their black eyes rolling and the flash of white eyeballs gave her a feeling of something dark and hot and mysterious, like eyes peering from a thicket. Only a few miles away was the Gulf of Mexico, a great expanse of silvery water. She felt as if it were almost at her feet, and she clutched the car again.

Then Mr. Ballentyne came hurrying out of the hotel, smiling, crying: "All settled!" In the face of his warm geniality she could not say what she had been feeling. All her little cautious statements and questionings he brushed easily aside.

"Now we're off for the woods—for the piny woods," he said gaily. But he added seriously: "It won't be woods much longuh, though. Eh, doctuh?"

"No, I presume not," Mr. Albright said.

"It's smaller than I thought of it," Mrs. Albright admitted.

"Oh! The town, you mean? Oh, yes. Not much of a

town naow," Mr. Ballentyne said gently. "But there's a fine class of people coming in. Northern people, professional people many of them, like you, doctuh. As I was savin', the doctuh'll be havin' a church heah in a few yeahs."

"Well, of course, I plan on retiring when I come out here," Mr. Albright put in hastily.

"I don't see," Mrs. Albright said faintly, "what there would be for my son-in-law to do here. You know we were hoping, if we settled here, to get him and my daughter to come down here after a few years. He's a teacher, a principal, but his health isn't very good——"

"Just the thing!" Mr. Ballentyne asserted heartily. "A good school man is just who we need aout heah."

And as they drove on, Mrs. Albright feeling heartened and somehow warmed, he began to fish in his pocket for letters and memoranda—driving with one hand, so that Mrs. Albright clung and gave little gasps when the car bumped in and out of ruts.

"This is it! This is a lettuh come yesterday from a lady in Illinois. She's a drawin' teachuh—been teachin' fo' twenty-one yeahs, she says. No wonduh she's gettin' ready to stop! She wants a home just like you-all. I look for her daown heah. Wish you-all could stay and meet her. 'Miss Imogen Bundy.' She's got a right fancy name. But she sounds like a very nice lady. . . . Heah's anothuh school man, Mrs. Albright! You'd bettuh get your son-in-law daown heah quick!"

They laughed.

"Oh, that's the class of folks we want," Mr. Ballentyne tossed back at them, turning now and again to Mrs. Albright's dismay and letting the car make a dive for the side of the road. "That's our object in settlin' up this land. 'Course," he admitted, with a rather engaging candour, "we're business men, Mistuh Hutchins and I, and we want to get a fair return fo' ouh labuh. But we want to bring the Saouth into its own." Mr. Albright nodded vigorously. "We're proud of the folks that buy this land. Professional

people are the finest class of folks on the face of the earth. Isn't that so, Mrs. Albright? Isn't it, doctuh? And that's not slammin' business men."

The Albrights were modestly silent, but gratified. All the more because of his Southern speech that sounded so gallant with the *r*'s elegantly absent.

"Naow," Mr. Ballentyne said cheerfully, "we'll just stop and see a few of the neighbuhs. I want to see Mistuh Christy a moment, and while I'm talkin' with him, maybe you-all would enjoy lookin' araound. See what one Alabama farm looks like."

He drove up to a square house that was painted brown and yellow. It was not what Mrs. Albright thought of as Southern—there was no shrouding of jasmine and creepers, only the bare little house on the flat ground. A young woman in a blue bungalow apron came to the kitchen door and then caught up a home-made blue sunbonnet and came out to them.

"Good mawnin', Mrs. Christy!" Mr. Ballentyne called.

"Oh, good morning. I didn't see just who it was."

"Mistuh Christy at home this mawnin'?"

"Yes, he's out here somewhere. I'll see if I can find him—"

"Nevuh mind! We'll find him. Mrs. Christy, like you to know these folks. Mrs. Albright—Doctuh Albright. They come from neah yo' old haunts."

"Is that so?" Mrs. Christy said.

"Well now, if I may, Mrs. Christy, I'll just hunt up that man of yours. Like to come with me doctuh?"

"Yes, indeed," Mr. Albright answered with alacrity.

"Mrs. Albright, I'd like to take you too, if the sun wouldn't be too hot."

"She can come inside," Mrs. Christy offered.

"Don't you want to look about, mamma?" Mr. Albright asked.

"No, I think I'll go inside if it won't be any trouble."

The men started off, and Mrs. Albright walked silently

beside Mrs. Christy to the back door. "I'd ask you to go into the front, but I ain't got around to getting it cleaned up," Mrs. Christy said. There was a baby in the kitchen, a chunky little light-haired fellow in blue rompers. That gave the two women a topic and softened the slight stiffening of aloofness in Mrs. Christy's manner. After a few moments, she became affable, and offered Mrs. Albright a ripe persimmon. Mrs. Albright stopped to savour every bite with interest and pleasure, telling Mrs. Christy how she meant to send back a box of fruit to her daughter Helen.

"Yes, I s'pose it seems good to you when it's just new," Mrs. Christy said. "We see so many of them. I like 'em pretty good, but I'm kind of tired of them. Apples are what sound good to us now."

"Oh, dear me, haven't you apples?" Mrs. Albright asked, shocked. She wondered of what they made jelly in the South; and the names of the fruits sounded exotic and somewhat frightening to her.

Mrs. Christy asked her with a tinge of curiosity:

"You folks going to settle here? I see you come with Mr. Ballentyne."

But Mrs. Albright closed up immediately at that, and merely answered with prim reserve: "I don't know. We're just making a trip down here."

"I guess he's been selling quite a number of tracts lately."

When Mrs. Albright began to hint gently to discover how Mrs. Christy liked the country, Mrs. Christy's replies were as evasive and discreet as her own. She was busy washing out some of the baby's clothes. Mrs. Albright sat in the small, clean, hot kitchen, slowly eating the mellow fruit, which seemed to her a little too soft and rich to be really wholesome.

They heard the voices of the men outside—Mr. Albright's eager, Mr. Ballentyne's hearty and soft, Mr. Christy slower and more reserved in his answers. Mrs. Albright started up at once. Her husband met her on the steps, with his hands full of specimens. He was in a flush of interest.

"Well, mamma," he said at once, "you should have come with us! This gentleman has been showing us all the products he raises out here. Look!" He dumped the little collection of wilting leaves and shiny beans into her hands as she held them out wonderingly. "Here's a sweet-potato leaf. These are what castor oil is made from. It's strange to see these things actually growing!" In fact, it seemed to him almost a miracle that these plants, which were only names at home, should be actually seen growing out of the soil. It made the land itself miraculous. "Now, there's something I want *you* to see. Mr. Christy's going to show us his orange grove."

This interested her. She wanted to tell Helen, and the ladies at home, that she had seen oranges growing—perhaps to send them an orange that she herself had picked.

"Now you're in an orange grove!" Mr. Albright exclaimed with delight. He displayed the trees with as much pride as if they belonged to him.

"Pick one," Mr. Christy said.

"Oh, no, I don't want to spoil your trees," Mrs. Albright protested.

"Oh, they'll have plenty more!" Mr. Ballentyne laughed. "Heah, Mrs. Albright, let's find you a good one. They aren't ripe yet—but you try one."

He hunted about to find an orange on one of the small, neat trees. The orchard was young, he explained. It was just coming into bearing. Mrs. Albright took the round greenish fruit wonderingly. She wanted to keep it and send it to Helen, but Mr. Ballentyne insisted that she taste it. The fruit was sharp, unripe and yet not unpleasant. Perhaps it would be bad for her, though, being green—she would dispose of it when he wasn't looking.

"Well, sir, it's quite an experience," Mr. Albright said, "to pick oranges right off the trees."

Still, as they went toward the car, Mrs. Albright was thinking that she did not wholly approve of the place. Certainly the Christys were not "professional people."

They were a nice young couple, she thought, but they looked like farmers with their tanned skin and sunburnt hair. She and Mr. Albright did not intend to make regular farmers of themselves. Of course, they would pick their oranges and melons, and cherish their plants. She would never want Helen—supposing Helen and Emmett came down here too—to be a farmer's wife. A girl who had had the education they had given Helen! Mr. Albright knew nothing about farming, any more than what he had learned from raising a garden—they had had nice gardens, always.

Mr. Ballentyne, as if guessing her thoughts, turned to them as they drove away and said: "There's a fine young couple! Came aout heah and made that little place fo' themselves. They can teach us Southerners a lot we don't know—and I say it who was bo'n and raised in the Saouth and wouldn't live any place else."

"Yes, of course," Mrs. Albright put in timidly, "but Mr. Albright and I couldn't do regular farming, you know. I'm sure my daughter and her husband wouldn't care to do that."

"Oh, no, suttinly not, you have a different proposition. No, while you-all are up No'th gettin' ready to come daown to us, yo' fahming will all be looked aftuh. Yo'll have a nice little set of trees all ready fo' you."

"Well of course," Mr. Albright said indulgently, "Mrs. Albright's thinking of an Iowa farm. Forty acres isn't like two hundred, mamma. It will be like having a big orchard—just enough to keep us busy. Yes, we want just enough for us to handle nicely—a nice little place."

"That's it, that's it!" Mr. Ballentyne responded warmly.

Now he was turning the big car into a white sandy road. They entered the pine-trees. The road twisted and turned—past swamps at which Mrs. Albright gazed fearfully, with their grey gum-trees tangled in grey moss; bumping over little streams that lay like brown glass above lily leaves and long grasses. The tall pines stood straight, or curved, and the air among them was fresh, sunny and wild in a strange

sweet way, without the deep-rooted sombre massiveness of Northern pine forests. Nothing was deep-rooted here. The long grass had a shallow hold. The tall slender trees were uprooted by a wind from the Gulf. The little streams spread and were shallow. Light, easy, carefree. . . . They swung past a little ramshackle house enclosed in a picket fence with two sycamore-trees . . . a glimpse of a grey, unpainted shack near the swamp with ragged children playing about it. . . . And then sunny wilderness.

Mr. Ballentyne drew up at an uncharted spot where pine-trees grew thickly.

"This is the fo'ty!" he said.

And looking out in wonder and astonishment, it seemed to them that the very curves of the pine trunks, the fall of the ground, had more significance because this land might be their own.

4

Their first feeling of desolation, when they got out of the car and stood there in the long shallow-rooted grass waiting for Mr. Ballentyne, had worn off. Now they had been wandering about—aimlessly, it seemed to Mrs. Albright, who couldn't understand much about just vacant land—looking at everything, feeling of the pine bark, testing the soil, bending down to pick strange flowers. Mr. Ballentyne had been talking constantly and cheerfully, and Mr. Albright answering him with a seeming wiseness that bewildered her. Whether it was good soil—what was the soil's depth, the sub-soil, the minerals—she could not tell. All the while her eyes were wandering off from these things and calculating where a house might stand, where flowers could be planted.

The look of the wilderness, which exhilarated Mr. Albright, frightened her. It was sunny here, but close by was the swamp, veiled in grey mosses, full of wild secrecy. The breeze that moved the tufted pine-trees came from the Gulf.

Out of the mass of statistics that the men were talking, her mind seized and clung to certain things that made the strange future possible to her—roses blooming in February; all the fruit they could eat; the road to Mobile; a little spot for a house; the neighbours who would be coming in. But as Mr. Albright walked about, laying his palm against a pine trunk, hearing of oranges, melons, nuts, roses—thinking of the silvery ocean waters that lay only a few miles to the south and that sent this salty breeze that now was fresh against his skin—he seemed to be viewing the days of his age through a pure and sunlit radiance of Virgilian peace and quietude. It was like a low song, it was like poetry, under all Mr. Ballentyne's brisk explanations to which he listened and replied with pride in the exact knowledge he had gathered from all his books and folders on the South.

"And then the pecans," Mr. Ballentyne was saying. "Did you-all notice that big pecan-tree as we drove into Wild Bird? Well, suh, an old lady owns that tree and she lives on the income of that one tree."

"That ought to please you, mamma," Mr. Albright said. "You like nutting so well. We'll have to let you look after our pecan grove."

It was true. She always wanted to get into the woods when it came fall. They used to drive out with Pet, their old horse, and the one-seated buggy, and get a gunny-sackful. They didn't keep a horse, of course, any more; she had to depend upon being asked by one of their neighbours who had a car. It was not just that the nuts were so nice to use for cakes and salads in the winter. She was disappointed when old Mr. Endicott brought them a pailful of black walnuts from his two trees. She wanted to pick the nuts herself, to find them in their big sticky green hulls among the fallen leaves, to listen and run a little way when the strong member of the party took a great branch and hit the walnut boughs . . . to wander apart from the others, and hear only the secret sound of her own hands rustling

among the leaves. Last year, little Jamie Robbins had gone with them to climb the trees and shakes the nuts down. . . . how far away his voice had sounded!

A soft melting, a brightness, came over her sedate, small-featured face at the thought of having fruit and nuts of her own to pick—she herself taking little pailfuls of good things to other people, instead of having them given to her; trees of her own that she could cherish, year after year, and flowers that she could plant without fearing that she must leave them; her own orchard, her own woods, no one's permission to ask when she entered. She could send back boxes of nuts and oranges to her best friends at home, people in the various towns where they had lived who had been kind to them and for whom she could do so little in return. The very thought gave her pride and eased her old sensitive humility.

All her cautious little statements seemed to be answered, one after another. The land was wild now, it was covered with pines. But the pines would all be cleared away. Papa seemed to think that that could be easily done. While Mr. Ballentyne explained the method, her eyes wandered from him, noting, in the long thin grass, a strange kind of lily-like flower, yellow, with a centre of dusky red. The men knew all about such things as clearing the land. Such matters she would take on trust, after they had reassured her that it could be done. In fact, she made her cautious statements to be reassured. She had urged papa to be careful. Now she would trust to him, as she had trusted in the row-boat out on Clear Lake, and when they drove old Pet past a threshing-machine out in the country. Over her faint sense of desolation went Mr. Ballentyne's cheerful words in a bright stream.

“It won’t take long to get this forest away. When you-all come daown heah in a few yeahs’ time, yo’ place will be ready fo’ you. Then you can set up yo’ house.”

“Yes, I see. I understand.”

“There’s nevuh been, I feel free to say—and you’ll back

me, doctuh—a proposition like it fo' professional people. What you-all want is a home. That's what Mistuh Hutchins and I are aimin' to give you."

Both the Albrights were silent, impressed. The land was wild. The trees, the very grass and the earth on which they stood, were strange to them. At night, different stars appeared in the big soft sky. But if they built a home, it would be theirs. They could ask Helen to stay with them if . . . anything should happen to Emmett. At the thought of that, Mrs. Albright's heart grew warm, her hands tightened, with the old feeling they had had when Helen was a little girl and she had held her. She could go anywhere—no place was too strange—if there she could make a home and a refuge for Helen.

Mr. Ballentyne had wandered off discreetly, touching the bark of this pine and that in a testing fashion, bending down to pick a spear of grass.

"Well, mamma!" Mr. Albright said momentously.

At once her timid fears, deep instincts and intuitions that could not be put into words, rushed over her. "Oh, papa, must we decide? It's so strange here." No, she could not find words for those deeply hidden things that stirred now, ominously. They were wordless, and papa would call them foolish, superstitious.

He said with a touch of impatience: "Well, mamma, you must look ahead. If we want a home, we must make it."

"Yes, I know it," she said.

She could not hold him back now. Papa was "convinced." But her thought clung tightly—at this moment when she knew she must let go—to their precious seven thousand dollars that lay cautiously divided between the bank in Bloomfield and that in Ross, where they had formerly lived. Two thousand she had inherited from her parents, and the other five thousand they had squeezed painstakingly out of their income, year by year, to give them a home when they were old and Mr. Albright could no longer preach. . . . But they were almost old now. Their

income would never be larger. It would be less and less. They would go from smaller town to smaller town. If they left Bloomfield, where would they go? Her heart grew cold, as if black cold depths of water had suddenly flooded over it. She clung helplessly to this land of warm air and tall slender trees—to that yellow lily in the grass.

"Well, perhaps . . ." She admitted.

"It won't be like this," he told her confidently. "More people will be coming all the time—they're bound to when they see this country. Who knows but what we can get Emmett and Helen down here near us!"

Her face brightened quickly.

"We never could at home. And all we could do there, mamma, would be to buy a house for us to live in. It wouldn't be an investment. This is looking toward the future. You mustn't keep your eyes, mamma, right on the ground."

Her face looked distressed.

"All the time we can be saving, until this is ready for us. We'll be having this to look forward to."

He wanted the land. He had set his heart upon it. Already, he looked at the pines, at the slopes of grass, with a warmly swelling sense of possession. A new dignity came over him as he felt himself a landowner, a man with possessions. It was a spiritual kingdom that he had been preaching, for which he had been working all his life; but no longer would the men in his church, the men of property, the men who had the say-so, intimidate and humiliate him. This was his own. He said, with a sudden realization:

"Mamma, I'll tell you. I've always wanted to give you a home. You've had to go around with me all these years, and I don't want you to do it when we get old. I want *you* to have something. This is our chance—in this country that's got a future before it—and with all the romantic things about it, too. If we couldn't start earlier, we can start now."

She did not answer. Her small lips were quivering. He knew that she consented.

As they stood there, making their decision, they were conscious of the faint swaying of the pines and of a light flood of sunshine over the long grass. The charm of the South touched them softly, like the touch of a hand . . . light, sweet, warm, frail and yet strangely poignant, and under all the sunlight and the blossoms, forlorn. He felt it; and although he set his lips firmly, being practical, making a prudent decision, it was that Virgilian light—a silvery glow that spread inland from the Gulf—that entranced him.

Mr. Ballentyne, sensing the moment, strolled back to them. He noted the solemnity of their faces.

"Well, doctuh?" he said.

"Well, I believe we've decided to take it, Mr. Ballentyne."

"Fine, fine!"

Now that the land was their own, they did not want to leave it. But Mr. Ballentyne, although he cheerfully consented to their looking around as much as they pleased, looked at his watch and mentioned the dinner at the hotel.

"Of co'se, we aren't obliged to go back yet—"

"We mustn't be late when you've ordered the dinner," Mrs. Albright said at once. Mr. Albright hastily agreed.

Reluctantly, they stepped off their own soil and into the car. It whirred, and started; and for as long a time as they could they looked back at their pine-trees, lofty and glistening, against their blue sky, so strangely now their own.

The car went at a speed around curves and over patches of corduroy that made Mrs. Albright forget all about her gloves and cling as hard as she could. But she was not so frightened now. The warm glow that follows a decision was upon them. They chattered with the happiness of relief, conscious of the approval of Mr. Ballentyne and of having done well by him.

Dinner was waiting for them. If they had not bought the land, they would have been ashamed to eat it. Now, they could enjoy every mouthful, and marvel over the

strange dishes. The landlady, fat and smiling, seemed to approve them too. The host, a small man, sitting on the porch with his feet up, derided people who were still willing to endure cold weather. They had some wild pigeon shot in the swamps. Mr. Ballentyne pressed the good things upon them, urging them to eat, praising the landlady. After dinner, he insisted on taking kodak pictures of them, standing in front of the banana-tree. He had come to like this elderly couple, with their pleased but not too ready acceptance of what he did for them, with their little rigidities of conscience and their small but hard integrity. All kinds of people came to look at the land. Since they had bought, since they were his customers and he was successful, he could indulge his liking and let it grow faintly personal. That queer old customer whom he was trying patiently, by hook and crook, to inveigle into an investment—who slid off warily, like a fish, the instant he seemed to be snared—was coming again to the office. But Mr. Ballentyne smilingly, and without an intimation, let himself be made late for the appointment while his old couple enjoyed their dinner.

5

They drove past the Christy house. Mr. Christy had come up to the back door for a drink. He paused in the act of taking off his big straw hat and wiping his face, and watched them.

“There goes Ballentyne back to town on the tear,” he said. He watched the big car until it was out of sight. “Well, I expect he’ll be back with the next load.”

His eyes darkened, and grew bitter. He was dead tired with working out in the sun since early morning. Everything piled up at once, and there was no help, white or black, to be had. And then when the stuff was ready, it had to be marketed. He broke out:

“Make me tired! Think they can sit at home and have

things grow of themselves and be all ready for them to come and just pick 'em off the trees! My gosh, look at how we've worked! What do folks like that know about this business? Think you don't have to make a living out here—it's made for you."

"Oh, now, you shut up," his wife said mildly. "We've done well enough here."

"Yes, and we'd ought to, the way we've worked for it, Folks like that—lived in town all their lives, don't know what farming is, and think they can come out here and sit down and have everything fall in their laps!"

"Shut up now," his wife repeated, still mildly. "What are you so mad for? They'll find out without you to tell them."

"Well, it does make me mad to see all these folks think they can get things without having to work for them. They think because they ain't farmers——"

"Oh, now, they can't get things without work any more than farmers can. You go back to the field and get done and tend to business," she counselled.

He grumbled, but he went.

Four Generations

I

“MOVE just a little closer together—the little girl more toward the centre—that’s good. Now I think we’ll get it.”

The photographer dived once more under the black cloth.

“Stand back, ma,” a husky voice said. “You’ll be in the picture.”

Aunt Em stepped hastily back with a panicky look. Mercy, she didn’t want to show! She hadn’t had time to get her dress changed yet, had come right out of the kitchen, where she was baking pies, to see the photograph taken. She was in her old dark-blue kitchen dress and had her hair just wadded up until she could get time to comb it. It didn’t give her much time for dressing up, having all this crowd to cook for.

The boys, and Uncle Chris, standing away back on the edges, grinned appreciatively. Fred whispered to Clarence: “Laugh if ma’d got in it.” The way she had jumped back, and her unconsciousness of the ends sticking up from her little wad of hair, delighted the boys. When they looked at each other, a little remembering glint came into their eyes.

There was quite a crowd of onlookers. Aunt Em, Uncle Chris in his good trousers, and his shirt-sleeves, his sunburned face dark brown above the white collar that Aunt Em had made him put on because of Charlie’s. Uncle Gus and Aunt Sophie Spfierschlage had come over to dinner, and stood back against the white house wall, Aunt Sophie mountainous in her checked gingham. The boys, of course,

and Bernie Schuldt who was working for Chris, and another fellow who had come to look at some hogs and who was standing there, conscious of his old overalls and torn straw hat, mumbling: "Well, didn't know I was gona find anything like this goin' on." . . . Charlie's wife, Ella, had been given a chair where she could have a good view of the proceedings. She tried to smile and wave her handkerchief when little Phyllis looked around at her. Then she put the handkerchief to her eyes, lifting up her glasses with their narrow light shell rims, still smiling a little painfully. She had to think from how far Katherine had come. . . .

Aunt Em and Aunt Sophie were whispering: "Ain't it a shame Edna couldn't get over! They coulda took one of Chris and her and Marine and Merle, with Grandpa, too. . . . That little one looks awful cute, don't she? . . . Well, what takes him so long? Grandpa won't sit there much longer. I should think they coulda had it taken by this time a'ready."

They all watched the group on the lawn. They had decided that the snow-bushes would "make a nice background." The blossoms were gone, but the leaves were dark green and thick. What a day for taking a picture! It would be so much better out here than in the house. Katherine had made them take it right after dinner, so that little Phyllis would not be late for her nap—nothing must ever interfere with that child's nap. It was the brightest, hottest time of day. The tall orange summer lilies seemed to open and shimmer in the heat. Things were so green—the country lawn with its thick grass, the heavy foliage of the maple-trees against the blue summery sky of July. The thin varnished supports of the camera stand glittered yellow and sticky. The black cloth of the lens looked thick, dense, hot. The photographer's shirt was dazzling white in the sun, and when he drew his head out from under the cloth his round face shone pink. His coat made a black splotch tossed on the grass.

"The little girl more toward the centre."

All three of the others tried anxiously to make little Phyllis more conspicuous. "Here, we've got to have you showing—my, my!—whether the rest of us do or not," Charlie said jovially. Grandpa's small aged frail hand moved a little as if he were going to draw the child in front of him, but, with a kind of delicacy, did not quite touch her arm.

They had to wait while a fleecy cloud crossed the sun, putting a brief cool shadow over the vivid lawn. In that moment the onlookers were aware of the waiting group. Four generations! Great-grandfather, grandfather, mother, daughter. It was all the more impressive when they thought of Katherine and Phyllis having come from so many miles away. The snowball-bushes were densely green behind them—almost dusky in the heat. Grandpa's chair had been placed out there—a home-made chair of willow branches. To think that these four belonged together!

Grandpa, sitting in the chair, might have belonged to another world. Small, bent like a little old troll, foreign with his black cambric cap, his blue far-apart peasant eyes with their still gaze, his thin silvery beard. His hands, gnarled from years of farm work in a new country, clasped the home-made knotted stick that he held between his knees. His feet, in old felt slippers with little tufted wool flowers, were set flat on the ground. He wore the checked shirt of an old farmer. . . . It hardly seemed that Charlie was his son. Plump and soft, dressed in the easy garments, of good quality and yet a trifle careless, of Middle-Western small-town prosperity. His shaven face, paler now than it used to be and showing his age in the folds that had come about his chin; his glasses with shell rims and gold bows; the few strands of greyish hair brushed across his pale luminous skull. A small-town banker. Now he looked both impressed and shamefaced at having the photograph taken. . . . And then Katherine, taking after no one knew whom. Slender, a little haggard and worn, still young, her pale delicate face and the cords of her long soft throat, her little collar-bones, her dark intelligent weak eyes behind her

thick-rimmed glasses. Katherine had always been like that. Refined, "finicky," studious, thoughtful. Her hand, slender and a trifle sallow, lay on Phyllis' shoulder.

Phyllis. . . . Her little yellow frock made her vivid as a canary bird against the dark green of the foliage. Yellow—the relatives did not know whether they liked that, bright yellow. Still, she did look sweet. They hadn't thought Katherine's girl would be so pretty. Of course the care that Katherine took of her—everything had to revolve around that child. There was something faintly exotic about her liquid brown eyes with their jet-black lashes, the shining straight gold-brown hair, the thick bangs that lay, parted a little and damp with the heat, on the pure white of her forehead. Her little precise "Eastern accent" . . . Grandpa looked wonderingly at the bare arms, round and soft and tiny, white and moist in the heat. Fragile blue veins made a flower-like tracery of indescribable purity on the white skin. Soft, tender, exquisite . . . *ach*, what a little girl was here, like a princess!

The cloud passed. Katherine's white and Phyllis' yellow shone out again from the green. The others stood back watching, a heavy stolid country group against the white wall of the farm-house that showed bright against the farther green of the grove. Beyond lay the orchard and the rank green spreading cornfields where little silvery clouds of gnats went shimmering over the moist richness of the leaves.

"Watch—he's taking it now!"

In the breathless silence they could hear the long whirr and rush of a car on the brown country road beyond the grove.

Well, the picture was taken. Everyone was glad to be released from the strain.

Grandpa's chair had been placed nearer the house, under

some maple-trees. Charlie stayed out there with him awhile. It was his duty, he felt, to talk to the old man awhile when he was here at the farm. He didn't get over very often—well, it was a hundred miles from Rock River, and the roads weren't very good up here in Sac township. His car stood out at the edge of the grove in the shade. The new closed car that he had lately bought, a "coach," opulent, shining, with its glass and upholstery and old-blue draperies, there against the background of the evergreen grove with its fallen branches and pieces of discarded farm machinery half visible in the deepest shade.

It wasn't really very hard to get away from Rock River and the bank. He and Ella took plenty of trips. He ought to come to see his father more than he did. But he seemed to have nothing to say to Grandpa. The old man had scarcely been off the place for years.

"Well, pa, you keep pretty well, do you?"

"Ja, pretty goot . . . ja, for so old as I am—"

"Oh, now, you mustn't think of yourself as so old."

Charlie yawned, recrossed his legs. He lighted a cigar.

"Chris's corn doing pretty well this season?"

"Ach, dot I know nuttings about. Dey don't tell me nuttings."

"Well, you've had your day at farming, pa."

"Ja . . . ja, ja . . ."

He fumbled in the pocket of his coat, drew out an ancient black pipe.

Charlie said cheerfully: "Have some tobacco?" He held out a can.

The old man peered into it, sniffed. "Ach, dot stuff? No, no, dot is shust like shavings. I smoke de real tobacco."

"Like it strong, hey?"

They both puffed away.

Grandpa sat in the old willow chair. His blue eyes had a look half wistful, half resentful. Charlie was his oldest child. He would have liked to talk with Charlie. He was always wishing that Charlie would come, always planning

how he would tell him things—about how the old ways were going and how the farmers did now, how none of them told him things—but when Charlie came, then that car was always standing there ready to take him right back home again, and there seemed nothing to be said. He always remembered Charlie as the young man, the little boy who used to work beside him in the field—and then when Charlie came, he was this stranger. Charlie was a town man now. He owned a bank! He had forgotten all about the country, and the old German ways. To think of Charlie, their son, being a rich banker, smoking cigars, riding around in a fine carriage with glass windows. . . .

"Dot's a fine wagon you got dere."

Charlie laughed. "That's a coach, pa."

"So? Coach, is dot what you call it? Like de old kings, like de emperors, de Kaisers, rode around in. *Ja*, you can live in dot. Got windows and doors, curtains—is dere a table too, stove—no? *Ja*, dot's a little house on wheels."

He pursed out his lips comically. But *ach*, such a carriage! He could remember when he was glad enough to get to town in a lumber wagon. Grandma and the children used to sit in the back on the grain sacks. His old hands felt of the smooth knots of his stick. He went back, back, into reverie. . . . He muttered just above his breath: "*Ach, ja, ja, ja . . .* dot was all so long ago. . . ."

Charlie was silent too. He looked at the car, half drew out his watch, put it back. . . . Katherine crossed the lawn. His eyes followed her. Bluish-grey, a little faded behind his modern glasses—there was resentment, bewilderment, wistfulness in them at the same time, and loneliness. He was thinking of how he used to bring Kitty out here to the farm when she was a little girl, when Chris used to drive to Germantown and get them with a team and two-seated buggy. They had come oftener than now when they had the car. . . . "Papa, *really* did you live out here—on this farm?"

He had been both proud and a little jealous because she

wasn't sunburned and wiry, like Chris' children. A little slim, long-legged, soft-skinned, dark-eyed girl. "Finicky" about what she ate and what she did—he guessed he and Ella had encouraged her in that. Well, he hadn't had much when he was a child, and he'd wanted his little girl to have the things he'd missed. He'd wanted her to have more than his brothers' and sisters' children. He was Charlie, the one who lived in town, the successful one. Music lessons, drawing lessons, college . . . and here she had grown away from her father and mother. Chris' children lived close around him, but it sometimes seemed to him that he and Ella had lost Kittie, living away off there in the East. And when she came home, although she was carefully kind and dutiful and affectionate, there was something aloof. He thought jealously, maybe it would have been better if they hadn't given her all those things, had kept her right at home with them. . . . It hadn't been as much pleasure as he had anticipated having his little grandchild there. There was her "schedule" that Kitty was so pernickety about. He'd been proud to have people in Rock River see her beauty and perfection, but he hadn't been able to take her around and show her off as he'd hoped.

All day he had been seeing a slim fastidious girl in a white dress and white hair ribbons and black patent-leather slippers, clinging to his hand with little soft fingers when he took her out to see the cows and the pigs. . . . "Well, Kittie, do you wish we lived out here instead of in town?" She shook her head, and her small underlip curled just a little. . . .

He saw Chris and Gus off near the house. They could talk about how crops were coming, and he could tell them, with a banker's authority, about business conditions. He stirred uneasily, got up, yawned, stretched up his arms, said with a little touch of shame:

"Well, pa, guess I'll go over and talk to Chris awhile. I'll see you again before we leave."

"Ja—" The old man did not try to keep him. He

watched Charlie's plump figure cross the grass. *Ja*, he had more to say to the young ones. . . .

3

Aunt Em was through baking. She had gone into the bedroom to "get cleaned up." She had brought out chairs to the front porch. "Sit out here. Here's a chair, Ella—here, Katherine. Ach, Sophie, take a better chair than that." "Naw, this un'll do for me, Em."

"The womenfolks"—Katherine shuddered away from that phrase. She had always, ever since she was a little girl, despised sitting about this way with "the womenfolks." Planted squat in their chairs, rocking, yawning, telling over and over about births and deaths and funerals and sicknesses. There was a kind of feminine grossness about it that offended what had always been called her "finickiness."

Her mother enjoyed it. She was different from Aunt Em and Aunt Sophie, lived in a different way—a small plump elderly woman with waved greyish-silvery hair and a flowered voile dress with little fussy laces, feminine strapped slippers. But still there was something that she liked about sitting here in the drowsy heat and going over and over things with the other women. Sometimes, to Katherine's suffering disgust, she would add items about the birth of Katherine herself—"Well, I thought sure Kittie was going to be a boy. She kicked so hard—" "Oh, *mother*, spare us!" Aunt Em would give a fat comfortable laugh—"Don't look so rambunctious now, does she? Kittie, ain't you ever gona get a little flesh on your bones? You oughta get out and ride the horses around like Edna does."

Aunt Sophie Spfierschlage—that was the way she sat rocking, her feet flat on the floor, her stomach comfortably billowing, beads of sweat on her heavy chin and lips and around the roots of her stiff dull hair. Well, thank goodness she was only Aunt Em's sister, she wasn't really related to the Kleins. Aunt Em was bad enough.

They used to laugh over her fastidious disgust, when she sat here, a delicate critical little girl who didn't want to get on one of the horses or jump from rafters into the hay. "Kittie thinks that's terrible. Well, Kittie, that's the way things happen." "Ach, she won't be so squeamish when she grows up and has three or four of her own." Now she sat beside them, delicate, still too thin to Aunt Em's amazement. "Ain't you got them ribs covered up yet? What's the matter? Don't that man of yours give you enough to eat?"—her soft skin pale and her eyes dark from the heat, dressed with a kind of fastidious precision, an ultra-refinement: a fragile bar pin holding the soft white silk of her blouse, her fine dark hair drooping about her face. "Well, you ain't changed much since you got married!" Aunt Em had said. They expected to admit her now to their freemasonry, to have *her* add interesting times about the birth of Phyllis.

Phyllis—her little darling! As if the exquisite miracle of Phyllis could have anything in common with these things! Katherine suffered just as she had always suffered from even small vulgarities. But she sat courteous and ladylike now, a slight dutiful smile on her lips.

"Where does she get them brown eyes? They ain't the colour of yours, are they? Turn around and let's have a look at you—no, I thought your was kinda darker."

Aunt Em had come out now, had squatted down into another chair. "I guess her papa's got the brown eyes."

"Yes, I think she looks a little like Willis."

Ella said almost resentfully: "Well, I don't know whether she takes after Willis' folks or not, but I can't see that she looks one bit like Kittie or any of us."

"Well," Aunt Em said, "but look at Kittie. She don't look like you or Charlie neither. But I guess she's yours just the same, ain't she, Ella? . . . Say, you remember that Will Fuchs? *Ja*, his girl's got one they say don't belong to who it ought to. Her and that young Bender from over south—"

Katherine did not listen. How long before they could

leave? She had thought it right to bring Phyllis over here where her great-grandfather lived, as her father had wished. But it seemed worse to her than ever. She knew that Aunt Em wouldn't let them go without something more to eat, another of her great heavy meals with pie and cake and coffee. Her mother had always said, as if in extenuation of her visible enjoyment of the visit and the food: "Well, Aunt Em means well. Why don't you try and talk with her? She wants to talk with you." But Aunt Em and the Spfierschlages and the whole place seemed utterly alien and horrible to Katherine. For a moment, while they had been taking the photograph out on the lawn, she had felt touched with a sense of beauty. But she had never belonged here. She felt at home in Willis' quiet old frame house in New England, with his precise elderly New England parents—"refinement," "culture," Willis' father reading "the classics," taking the *Atlantic Monthly* ever since their marriage. She had always felt that those were the kind of people she ought to have had, the kind of home. Of course she loved father and mother and was loyal to them. They depended upon her as their only child.

This porch! It seemed to express the whole of her visits to the farm. It was old-fashioned now—a long narrow porch with a fancy railing, the posts trimmed with red. Her ancestral home! It was utterly alien to her.

They were talking to her again.

"Where's the girl—in taking her nap yet?"

"Yes, she's sleeping."

"Ach, you hadn't ought to make her sleep all the time she's off visiting. I baked a little piece of pie crust for her. I thought I'd give it to her while it was nice and warm."

"Oh, better not try to give her pie crust," Ella said warningly.

"Ach, that ain't gonna hurt her—nice home-made pie. Mine always et that."

"Ja, mine did too."

Katherine's lips closed firmly. She couldn't hurry and hurt father and mother—but oh, to get Phyllis home! Father—he was always trying to give the child something she shouldn't have, he wanted to spoil her as he had tried to spoil Katherine herself. . . . She shut her lips tight to steel herself against the pitifulness of the sudden vision of father—getting so much older these last few years—looking like a child bereft of his toy when she had firmly taken away the things with which he had come trotting happily home for his grandchild. He had gradually drawn farther and farther away. Once he had hurt her by saying significantly, when Phyllis had wanted a pink blotter in the bank: "You'll have to ask your mother. Maybe there's something in it to hurt you. *Grandpa* don't know." He had wanted to take Phyllis to a little cheap circus that had come to town, to show her off and exhibit her. Mother was more sympathetic, even a little proud of retailing to the other "ladies" how careful Katherine was in bringing up the child, what a "nice family" Willis had. But even she was plaintive and didn't understand. Both she and father thought that Katherine and Willis were "carrying it too far" when they decided to have Willis teach the child until they could find the proper school for her.

She heard a little sleepy startled voice from within the house—"Moth-uh!"

"Uh-huh! There's somebody!" Aunt Em exclaimed delightedly.

Katherine hurried into the darkened bedroom where Phyllis lay on Aunt Em's best bed-spread. The shades were down, but there was the feeling of the hot sunlight back of them. Phyllis' bare arm and legs were white and dewy. Her damp golden-brown bangs were pushed aside. Katherine knelt adoring. She began to whisper.

"Is mother's darling awake? . . . Shall we go home soon—see father? Sleep in her own little room?" . . . Her throat tightened with a home-sick vision of the little room with the white bed and the yellow curtains. . . .

They had left Grandpa alone again. Charlie and the other men were standing out beside the car, bending down and examining it, feeling of the tires, trying the handles of the doors.

Grandpa had left his chair in the yard and gone to the old wooden rocker that stood just inside the door of his room. His room was part of the old house, the one that he and Grandma had had here on the farm. It opened out upon the back yard, with a little worn narrow plank out from the door. It looked out upon the mound of the old cyclone cellar, with its wooden door, where now Aunt Em kept her vegetables in sacks on the damp cool floor, with moist earthen jars of plum and apple butter on the shelf against the cobwebbed well. The little triangular chicken houses were scattered about in the backyard, and beyond them was the orchard where now small apples were only a little lighter than the vivid summer green of the heavy foliage and where dark shiny bubbles of aromatic sap oozed out from the rough crusty bark.

The shadows in the orchard were drawing out long toward the East, and the aisles of sunlight too looked longer. The group of people moved about more. Everything had the freshened look of late afternoon.

Grandpa rocked a little. He puffed at his pipe, took it out and held it between his fingers. It left his lower lip moistened and shining above the fringe of silvery beard. His blue eyes kept looking toward the orchard, in a still fathomless gaze. His lops moved at times.

"Ach, ja, ja, ja . . ." A kind of mild sighing groan. It had pleased him that they had wanted the photograph taken, with the little great-grandchild. But that was over now. They had left him alone. And again, with a movement of his head: *"Ja, dot was all so long ago."*

Beyond the orchard, beyond the dark-green cornfields that lay behind it, beyond the river and the town . . . beyond

all the wide western country, and the ocean . . . what were his fixed blue eyes, intent and inward and sad, visioning now?

The rocker was framed in the doorway of his room. Even the odour of the room was foreign. His bed with a patchwork quilt, a little dresser, a chest of drawers. The ancient wall-paper had been torn off and the walls calcimined a sky-blue. Against the inner one hung his big silver watch, slowly ticking. . . . His eyes blue, and his hair under the little black cap, his beard, were silvery. . . . A German text with gaudy flowers hung on a woollen cord above the bed. "*Der Herr ist in Hirte.*"

He started. "Nun—who is dot?"

He did not know that little Phyllis had been watching him. Standing outside the door, in her bright canary-yellow, her beautiful liquid brown eyes solemnly studying him. She was half afraid. She had never seen anything so old as "Great-grandfather." The late afternoon sunlight shimmered in the fine texture of his thin silvery beard. It brought out little frostings and marks and netted lines on his old face in which the eyes were so blue. One hand lay upon his knee. She stared wonderingly at the knots that the knuckles made, the brownish spots, the thick veins, the queer look of the skin between the bones. She looked at his black pipe, his funny little cap, his slippers with the tufted flowers. . . .

"Ach, so? You t'ink Grandpa is a funny old man den? You want to look at him? So?"

He spoke softly. A kind of pleased smiling look came upon his face. He stretched out his hand slowly and cautiously, as if it were a butterfly poised just outside his door. A sudden longing to get this small pretty thing nearer, an ingenuous delight, possessed him now that he was alone with her. He spoke as one speaks to a bird toward which one is carefully edging nearer, afraid that a sudden motion will startle its bright eyes and make it take wing.

"Is dis a little yellow bird? Can it sing a little song?"

A faint smile dawned on the serious parted lips. He nodded at her. She seemed to have come a little closer. He too looked in wonderment, as he had done before, at the shining hair, the fragile blue veins on the white temples, the moist pearly white of the little neck, marvelling at her as he would have marvelled at some beautiful strange bird that might have alighted a moment on his door-step. . . .

"Can't sing a little song? No? Den Grandpa will have to sing one to you."

He had been thinking of songs as she sat here, they had been murmuring somewhere in his mind. Old, old songs that he had known long ago in the old country. . . . His little visitor stood quite still as his faint quavering voice sounded with a kind of dim sweetness in the sunshine. . . .

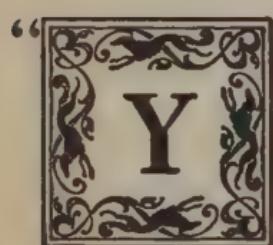
*"Du, du, liegst mir im Herzen,
Du, du, liegst mir im Sinn,
Du, du, machst mir viel Schmerzen,
Weisst nicht wie gut ich dir bin—
Ja, ja, ja, ja, weisst nicht wie gut ich dir bin."*

The gaze of her brown shining eyes never wavered, and a soft glow of fascinated interest grew in them as the sad wailing simplicity of the old tune quavered on the summer air. For a moment she was quite near, they understood each other.

"You like dot? Like Grandpa's song?"

She nodded. A tiny pleased smile curved her fresh lips. . . . Then suddenly, with a little delicate scared movement, as if after all she had discovered that the place was strange, she flitted away to her mother.

Golden Wedding



“YOU ought to change your clothes, pa.”

“What you in such a hurry to get my clothes changed for?”

“Well, you want to be ready when George comes in, don’t you?”

“Aw, he won’t get in to-day. How can he get the car through all this snow?”

“He will, too. Didn’t they invite us out there?”

“Yeah, but they didn’t know it was goin’ tuh snow like this.”

“You go now and put your other clothes on.”

He grumbled, but finally obeyed—which was just like him.

Yes, but why did he always have to act this way? He had been doing it ever since they were married. He went through just so much grumbling first before he would do anything that he knew he must. It was the same thing over again every time they went anywhere; and all her prodding hadn’t done any good that she could see.

“Won’t get in to-day.” That was just like him, too. If he knew that she was counting on anything, he had to hold out and belittle it, raise objections. He never wanted to admit that anything was going to turn out right. He always had good arguments to oppose to her faith, which he declared didn’t take any account of the facts. But she still held to this blind faith of hers, and he to his objections. Sometimes things worked out her way; sometimes his. She pulling ahead, he pulling back. But the pulling had

amounted to this much in fifty years—that he usually gave in in the end; and that she was a little worried in spite of her hopeful assertions that things were going to justify her belief.

So that now she did have to admit to herself that it was snowing hard. She was sure that George would come . . . but her eyes screwed up anxiously as she looked out over the plants at air thick with misty flakes. It looked as if it wasn't going to stop all day. The covered plants and peony-bushes just outside were big clumps of whiteness. Fine dark twigs stuck out from the snow humped over the bending raspberry-bushes. When she peered down the street, she could barely see the willow-trees at the farther end, bluish and dim. Few passers-by came down this little side street where the old Willeys lived. The glimmery softness of the white road showed only two crooked tracks from a morning milk-wagon that were already nearly filled, and as white as all the rest of the world.

Just the same, she believed that George was going to get in somehow.

Mr. Willey came back into the room.

She looked up sharply, and cried in despair: "Oh, pa, why did you have to go put on that old necktie?"

"What old necktie?"

"Oh, you know what I mean! That old thing that I should think you'd be ashamed to wear around the place any more, let alone where we're going to-day. Go and put on your nice one—the one Jenny sent you for Christmas."

"Whatta I wanna put that on fur! To ride out in the snow?"

"Snow!" she scoffed. "How's the snow going to hurt it? Can't you cover it up? Now you go and put that on. Try and look decent for once, to-day. You don't know who may be there to see us."

"Yes, you keep talkin' about that. Who do you think's goin' to be there?"

"Well, pa, you know the dinner's for us."

"Oh, I guess they ain't such a whole grist of folks comin' out in all this snow jest to eat dinner with *us*."

"You go and put that other tie on."

He went. But her small frail hands, bluish and veined, shook a little at the crotchetting with which she was trying to fill in the time. Her eyes moistened, and her mouth tightened into a childish grimace of weeping. Why did pa have to be so mean—and just to-day? They knew each other with such terrible intimacy that each had an uncanny perception of just what tiny things could hurt the other. Pretending this dinner wasn't going to amount to anything; depreciating her proud glory as a bride of fifty years; bringing up the sense of all the intimate, dingy happenings to tarnish the splendour of this occasion. Putting on that old tie to-day was a blow at her importance as his wife, at their marriage. He was always insisting upon their age and insignificance . . . and the silent, ghost-white street, the meagreness of their little yard with the few bushes, the bleak lines of the storm entry, those half-filled wheel tracks—all bore him out. Two old people, out of things, living in a little house off the main road. Denying the significance of their one achievement of continuity.

It made her bitter, too. What did it amount that they had been married fifty years? Pa was so mean. Sentimental thoughts with which she had begun the day—unconsciously framing themselves in her mind in the grandiloquent terms of the town paper—were stringently checked by the terrible familiarity of his attitude. Just then, she didn't see why she *had* been such a fool as to have lived with him fifty years—why anyone should celebrate it.

Oh, well—but then, that was pa. After all, she knew how much the grumbling amounted to. Why did she let herself be so riled by it every time? Her best dress of dark-grey silk, shimmering so nicely in the light from the window, raised the occasion, would not let her feel harsh. She knew that all those objections were partly a defence against the ill fortune of which they had had enough—he was not going

to admit that things might turn out well, so that he wouldn't be disappointed again. He had had to make an assertion with that old tie to conceal a sneaking hope that this dinner might be a big affair, with people met to celebrate. Their long years together stretched out before her inner vision . . . He'd been a pretty good husband after all, had worked hard, hadn't spent his money for drink or run after other women. She supposed you couldn't have everything.

She cried excitedly: "Pa! Here comes George! Now you hurry up and get yourself ready."

But she was the one, after all, who had to scurry to the dresser for a last hairpin to stick into her neat little knob of hair, to refasten her brooch in her lace collar, search for another handkerchief. He was ready, tie and all, and she was still in the bedroom when George, their son-in-law, came stamping in, scuffing the thick soft snow off his big overshoes.

"Ain't you ready, folks?"

"Ma! Hurry up! Well, what in thunder's she doing? Thought she was ready an hour ago."

2

"I didn't know as you'd get here, George."

"Yep—oh, there's lots of ways of gettin' in."

"The old bobs still come in pretty handy, I'll tell ye," Mr. Willey said.

"Wrapped up good, grandma?"

"Oh, yes, I know how to bundle." Her voice came muffled through the fascinator that she had wound around her head over a knitted hood. She stepped along blindly behind George, down the covered walk, squinting against the misty flakes, trying to keep hold of the coarse brown hair of George's fur coat . . . feet making soft cavernous dents in the thick snow . . . "Why, there's Reverend and Mrs. Baxter in the bob, ain't it?"

"Yeah, they're going along with us. Can yuh get in, grandma?"

George lifted her over the side of the bob, and with a little scramble she managed to get in. The Methodist minister and his wife were tucked snugly into a corner. Mr. Baxter shouted jovial greetings. Mrs. Baxter smiled and nodded, only glints of eyes showing between squinted eyelids, two little hard red cheeks and a ruddy blob of nose let out of the big scarf tied over her head.

"Get in. Lots of room."

Four ministerial feet in heavy, shining rubbers were hitched awkwardly over the thick robe covering the floor of the bob, through little holes of which stuck bent yellow straws. The old people squatted down stiffly, and Mr. Baxter drew the fur robe over them.

"Well, how's the wedding party?"

"Oh . . . I guess they're all right," Mrs. Willey said with shy pleasure.

"Looks more like a silver wedding than a golden wedding to-day."

"Yes, ain't the snow bad!"

"All fixed back there?" George called.

"All fixed! Let 'er go!"

"*Gid-dap!*"

The two big horses gave a plunge forward, the bob rocked, tilted up on the edge of the road . . . They passed the snowy willows and got out on the main road, where there were already silvery-smooth bob tracks above the gravel, no ruts to make the women give little shrieks and put out their hands blindly. The horses settled into an even trot.

"Isn't this nice, though?" Mrs. Baxter exulted.

All felt the exhilaration. The strangeness of the snow made the day a festival.

They stopped trying to shout things at one another, getting the wet small flakes in their mouths. They snuggled down on the straw under the fur robe. The bob went softly through the new, pure whiteness. Snow kept falling,

gentle as mist—tiny flakes, and big tufted splotches. The road ahead and the road behind were lost—there was only a place of dim white silence, and they moving in it.

"Are we there?"

"Why, I guess we are!"

"I didn't hardly know where we're getting."

The bob trundled over the wooden planks across the ditch and into the drive between the willow-trees that were blue-brown through the snow . . . misty, dreamlike, strange. The place had a festive air, too, because of the magic difference the snow made—the big barn roof white against the shrouded sky; the old wagon standing out there softly covered, rounded, all its stark angles agone.

"Well, I guess I didn't spill anybody out," George said.

They plodded to the house. George had let them out near the back door. They went up the steps, with a great stamping and scuffing—Clara in the doorway urging them in, they protesting that they must "sweep themselves off."

"Aw, it's just the kitchen—won't hurt this floor—come on in."

They went in, brushing and shaking. At once they were enveloped in warmth from the big range, with scents of chicken browning, biscuits, coffee, that their nostrils breathed in with a sharp deliciousness . . . snow melting on their wraps, shaking off in a fine chill spray, making pools on the linoleum. They had a glimpse of Darlene, the youngest girl, at the stove, her face flushed a deep hot rose under the brown hair. Many dishes about. . . .

"Oh, don't stay in here!" Clara was urging. "No, your things won't hurt anything. Ain't the first time there's been snow in this house to-day."

Mrs. Baxter and Mrs. Willey found themselves pushed into the chilly downstairs bedroom, where they unwrapped scarfs and fascinators, and where Mrs. Baxter—with apology and an alert glance at the door—yanked up her skirt and revealed black woollen tights which she tugged off her portly legs.

"Didn't know but what the snow might get in," she panted. "So I thought I'd come prepared. I guess I won't shock you ladies getting these off—hope none of the men'll look in here—might see a sight—"

"They ain't around," Clara said comfortingly. "That's just all right—just the thing to wear."

Clara stood until the wraps were off. She was heated, so that her greyish-brown hair looked dry and sheeny above her flushed face. She wore a bungalow apron. And yet she looked festive, too. Extra clean, her mother thought, with her fat arms bare to the elbow, her perspiring neck.

"Well, if you've got everything you want—"

"Oh, yes! Don't pay any attention to us, Clara. I'll come out and help you just as soon as I get my things off."

"No, now, ma. You go in the parlour and visit with Mrs. Baxter. I don't want either of you in the kitchen. Minnie'll help me."

"Oh, is Minnie and John here?"

"Yes, they're here. Minnie's here and the rest are coming."

"Well, I guess we'll have to obey," Mrs. Willey said with a pleased flattered laugh.

They went into the parlour and seated themselves nicely. Mrs. Willey bent down to pick off a tiny straw clinging to her grey silk dress. Then she folded her hands and rocked.

She had half expected all along to find people here. And she saw no one but Clara and Darlene, and her daughter-in-law Minnie, who peeped in a moment. But the minister's family being here made it all right to have worn the grey silk—justified her in having ordered the necktie. Mrs. Baxter had on a dark-blue taffeta that rustled as she rocked.

All the same, the old lady could sense an air of preparation. The odours in the kitchen, that quick, half-realized glimpse of dishes . . . Even the bedroom had been specially clean; a glossy white scarf on the dresser, and the tatting-edged pillow shams. Clara had her best things out. The dining-room door was closed. Yes, and in the parlour too

the chairs were set so neatly. The perfect order of the mission table suggested something beyond the everyday. As they rocked, Mrs. Willey was alert for every sound. There was a shrill excited tone in the noise and laughter in the kitchen, abruptly stilled, and then breaking out again; a tramping, a going back and forth that suggested more people in the house than were apparent; children's voices in some upstairs room.

The realization of the occasion brought back heightened memories. As she looked about the parlour, with its new Victrola and davenport and miscellaneous chairs, Mrs. Willey was on the point of saying to Mrs. Baxter: "This don't look much the way the place did when Mister and I first came here!" But she could not communicate that poignant memory of the old rooms, that was somewhere deep in her mind . . . small, bare, the few walnut furnishings, the feeling of raw openness all around. . . . She rocked. Her eyes had a distant look.

She was excited by the scents from the kitchen, the subdued bustle there.

Shouts came from outside. Mrs. Willey turned quickly to the window—the shouts an answer to her expectation.

A great bob load was coming up to the house, rocking as it turned into the drive—people shouting, waving. Mrs. Willey's hands felt trembling, her heart beat sharply, as she rose. The two old people stood blinking, she gratified, he sheepish, as a confused lot of people came tramping in, and crying:

"Where's the bridal couple? Look at the blushing groom! Well, well, well—many happy returns of the day!"

The dining-room door opened—

"Go in, ma."

"Yes, the bridal couple must lead the way."

The old people protested, as a matter of duty, but in-

wardly pleased to be pushed in ahead of the others, to sit at the head of the long table. Old Mr. Willey looked sheepish—all this splendour for an old couple like them. But Mrs. Willey was exalted. She saw the room in a heightened dazzle of bright confusion—glitter of tumblers, plates and silver, shine of white and yellow. Laughing, calling, appreciative murmurs . . . and then all of them standing there, suddenly and uncomfortably grave, Mrs. Willey still tremulous with excitement, while the minister gave the blessing, appropriately solemn and loud-toned . . . only one high, unconscious piping from the children's table in the corner.

The company seated themselves. The laughter, the murmurs broke out again.

"My, isn't this lovely!"

"Well, grandma, what do you think of it?"

"Well, I . . . I don't hardly know *what* to say," the old lady quavered.

The others laughed delightedly.

But as she sat at the head of the table, waited upon, getting served first, gradually things began to emerge out of that first shining confusion. She had known that this would happen, marvellous as it was. She recognized her daughter-in-law Minnie's best table-cloth, pieced out at the farther end (where George sat) with one of Clara's—that table-cloth with a crotchedet border, that had been laid away in a chiffonier drawer to be peeped at by admiring women, that had been used only at the weddings of Minnie's daughters. The granddaughters must have brought their best wedding silver in carefully packed baskets. Clara and George had never accumulated any silver. But even more thrilling than this was the festive look of the room, with its decorations—the yellow crêpe paper drawn from the centre-piece and tied in bows at the four corners, the yellow tissue paper flowers (Gertrude was the one who had made those) at every place . . . and all the decorations converging significantly toward the centre of the table where a huge cake

frosted in yellow, frilled about with paper and flowers, stood under a hanging, ruffly, yellow wedding bell.

She looked about the long, crowded table. They were all there—all the people whose lives were bound up with hers and pa's. Clara and George, Minnie and John, grandsons and grandsons-in-law, "connexions" from Prospect and the country around; even Nels Olson, a prosperous merchant in town now, but years ago the Willeys' hired man. The children at the square table were gleeful, and in their best.

And it was for them—for her and pa. She felt that exalted swelling in her breast, and tears stayed just behind the surface glisten of her eyes. Let pa say again that they were old and left behind, that no one thought of them, their day was over! No, this occasion was as glorious as she had been imagining it, in spite of his pessimistic objections. After all these work-filled years—fifty years—that had seemed at times to be petering out into a small meagre loneliness, to sit here, honoured, receiving again the delicious food and wine of personal recognition. All her people met to do her honour, to show that her life work had counted. . . . There was just one little twinge of disappointment. Robert had not come from Seattle. She had thought against all reason that when she opened the door, she would miraculously find Robert. She was glad she had mentioned it to no one. Pa's scoffing would have been justified.

It showed the grandeur of the occasion that Clara was "sitting down to table" beside George; although she gave hasty uneasy glances toward the kitchen. She had changed her apron, at the last minute, for her best dark green taffeta, above which her fat neck and face were flushed hotly. The granddaughters were waiting on the table, squeezing in between the chairs and the wall with their great platters of fowl, and bowls of gravy, and shining coffee-pot. The meal was like an old-time harvest dinner in abundance—beside the chicken, two big platters of goose that Minnie had cooked at home and brought over warm, and covered, to be heated in Clara's oven; potatoes, baked beans, escalloped

corn and peas, three kinds of bread and biscuits, relishes and jellies and pickles. But there were, beside, the special dishes that marked the importance of wedding and reunion dinners in Prospect and the country around—perfection salad, made the day before by the married granddaughters, great biscuit pans full of it; mayonnaise; and the women guests at the table had already discerned that the huge, yellow-frosted cake was *Golden Companion*, for which Lottie Disbrow had the community recipe.

The first absorption in food was giving way to a chatter. The children at the small table were yielding pieces of chicken that they had snatched, consenting to wait for “something *awful good*” promised by mothers in a deep whisper. Faces shone and glistened with warmth and food . . . and past the window-panes drifted the last aimless flakes of the big snowfall.

There were satisfied, admiring comments on the food. . . . “Ain’t these biscuits just fine! You make these, Clara?” “Yes. I was afraid they wasn’t going to come out good.” “Oh, they’re lovely!” . . . “More chicken? Well, sir, I’ve had a good deal already. Do you let folks have their third piece?” A worried “Oh, now, Henry, you want to be careful. You’ve had enough.” “Aw, go on and take it, Reverend. You need that drumstick.”

John said expansively: “Don’t pay any attention to the womenfolks! This is the time when a fellow can eat all he pleases. Can’t have a golden-wedding dinner every day.”

“Yes, but then you’ll expect your wives to run around for you maybe half the night because you eat too much again,” Minnie put in smartly.

All the wives murmured: “I guess so!” And laughed significantly.

But the men said: “Time enough to worry about that afterwards. Anyway, I can’t see but you’re eatin’ plenty yourself.”

Talk, clatter of dishes, shrill voices of children, babies

waking and wailing in the bedroom. Mrs. Baxter said: "It seems a shame to eat, and spoil this lovely table." But it was spoiled now—littered—the hand-painted jelly dishes messy, the salad bowls nearly empty, some of the crêpe paper torn and pushed askew. The dinner was ending. The girls brought heaping dishes of home-made ice cream with chocolate sauce.

"Oh, my! Look at this! I don't know where the room for it's coming from, but I'll have to find some."

Mr. Willey muttered: "What's this stuff on here?"

Mrs. Willey nudged him. "Pa! That's choc'late."

"Huh! Well, I dunno—"

"You rather have yours without, grandpa?"

"No, no!" Mrs. Willey protested, shocked. "He'll eat it this way. It looks lovely." She gave him a look.

The women perceived—felt in the air—what was about to come. But some of the men took up their spoons, began to eat, were reprimanded by their wives, and looked about, belligerent and then subdued. Mrs. Willey knew what it meant. Her small, faded mouth quivered. Clara was getting ready, half apologetic, to make the people listen. Gertrude stood behind her grandmother's chair, smiling.

"Sh! Sh!"

Clara got up with difficulty, squeezed between the table and her chair. Her voice had the toneless quavering of one unaccustomed and half ashamed to speak before others.

"Friends . . . and—a . . . As long as this is our mother's and father's golden-wedding day, maybe now we better ask mother to cut the wedding cake."

Mr. Baxter relieved the silent moment that followed by a loud, cheerful "That's right—let the bride do it." There were repetitions of "bride"; and they all laughed and murmured. Gertrude handed her grandmother the large knife; and the old lady, her hands trembling slightly, cut through the Golden Companion. The first wedge came out, moist, rich and yellow. They applauded. There were shouts of

laughter when Mr. Baxter found the old maid's thimble in his piece. Lottie Disbrow had marked the location of the ring, and Gertrude gave that piece to her grandmother.

"I'm gonna be rich—look, mamma, I'm gonna be rich!" one of the children cried, holding up the coin.

The wedding cake was passed about the table. The groom's cake—a dark, spicy fruit cake—was brought in already cut. Plates of angel food were passed about—"Better eat this, girls," the women told the unmarried girls, "and save your wedding cake to sleep on!" Now all the table relaxed into a warm, easy, chattering exhilaration. Even old Mr. Willey had dropped his defences, carried along by the spirit of the hour.

How did everyone feel it now? But those still talking relapsed into startled silence. Throat-clearings. The men looked down, rigid, embarrassed. The children turned with round, bright, fascinated eyes. Mrs. Willey's heart pounded. Clara's eyes began to water.

The Reverend Mr. Baxter rose, tapped on his glass with his knife.

"Sh—sh!" to the children.

Silence.

Mr. Baxter began to speak. Although he spoke in the slow, portentous voice that he used for the texts of his sermons, only significant phrases stood out, echoed and diminished in the minds of the listeners . . . "met together to-day . . . do honour to these two people . . . long journey together . . . achievement . . . God's blessing on this couple . . . " Words irradiated by the winter sunshine that came through the windows now, sparkling off the snow, and striking iridescence from the silver and glass, the glossy table-cloth, the warm shining heads of the listening children. The old couple at the head of the table took on a deep significance into which a lifetime of meaning was compressed, brought to a sudden realization. . . . "And now I have been asked by all these good people to present this token of the occasion. And may it always bring to your minds, Mr. and

Mrs. Willey, the memory of the affection of your children and neighbours, and their appreciation of your having reached this day."

He took the package that Gertrude handed him. Old Mr. Willey had to receive it—unwrap it—show to everyone the silver loving-cup. There were applause, hand-clappings, nose-blowings. A telegram from Robert was read. The sun shone warmly on the silver cup with its gilt lining, flashed off the two handles. The old lady could only murmur that she "thanked her dear children and neighbours." But the old man was flushed, carried beyond himself. He saw everything heightened . . . and his vision, like his wife's, stretched back and back to scenes so long ago that he scarcely knew how to communicate his sense of them. But he had to say something if she didn't.

He remembered when he first came out to Ioway, he said. The bob ride had brought back old times. Things that the children had thought old stuff, the tales that old men tell sitting on benches in front of the hotel—they listened to now with a sense of drama and event, of time passing. When he talked about the wedding day fifty years ago, the children heard him with delighted appreciation.

"In them days, we didn't go to all this fuss we do now for weddings. When folks wanted to git married, they just hitched up and drove into town, and that ended it. Well, sir, I was thinking what kind of a day that was. Not snowy—one of them real muddy days—and I tell ye, there *was* mud in those times! You fellers talk about roads, but you don't know what roads can be. Well, sir, we'd fixed on that day—and I was willing to put it off—but *she'd* got her mind set on it and of course it had to be. ["Asa!" Applause from the men, protests from the women.] We took my brother Luke's team, and him and me and her and Luke's girl—girl he had then, name of Tressy Bowers, she went out to Dakoty later—we started, with the horses all slicked up and their manes combed out, to drive into Prospect. Well, good enough goin' for a ways—and then jest out here

beyond where Ted Bloomquist's place is now, we run into one of them mudholes about three foot deep. Mud splashes up—girls screeches—and them two horses gits stuck so they can't pull out. Well, then the womenfolks had a time! They don't want us to git out in the mud because it'll spoil our wedding clothes, and they ain't nothing else for us to do but set there until somebody comes along. Well, a fellow did, and he helped us, and we got out.

"But then me and Luke's about as muddy as the team, and the women thought it was awful to go into town to the preacher's that way. So before we reached town—right down there by the crick, in what's Hibbert's pasture now—they made us fellers git out; and the girls they took sticks and whatever they could find handy, and tore a big chunk out o' their underskirts—women wore plenty o' clothes them days—and they made us fellers stand up and hev the mud scraped off our pants—and then when we's cleaned up a little, we went along to the preacher's and got married."

"And it's lasted quite a while!"

"Yes, sir. He done a good job of it."

Mrs. Willey was flustered, protesting—"You know it wasn't near as bad as that! What do you want to go and tell such things for?"—blushing when the underskirts were mentioned. In the warm, relieved, easy glow that followed, the loving-cup was passed about the table and admired. The names of all the givers were engraved upon it; and beneath the names of Asa Willey and Angie Pilgrim Willey, the two dates:

1874-1924.

Finally it was time to leave the table. The granddaughters would not let the older women into the kitchen. Carrie Gustafson had been called to help out with the dishwashing. The others went into the parlour, all the women urging one another to take the best rockers; looking out of the windows and commenting that the day had "turned out nice" after all. They were moving still in that warm, easy

exhilaration that came from food and coffee and that high moment at the table. "Tired, grandma?" "Oh, no, I ain't tired." The sun glistened on the snow. Mrs. Willey sat in an ease in which it seemed that she could never know what fatigue was—strangely free, her spirit exulting, doing what it pleased with her body. The great dinner was over, but the day was not ended yet. There were things to come. And then there would be the afterglow lingering for a long, long time.

"Guess we'll have a little music, folks," George said.

They listened, sentimentally gratified, when a melliflous barytone with an overdone accent sang *Silver Threads among the Gold*. But the murmuring and chatter, the pleas and shouts of children, sounded above the music—George's few "good" records, conscientiously played: *Il Trovatore*, *A Perfect Day*, *The Last Rose of Summer*. George began to yield to the children's pleas for "This one, grandpa," "Play this one, Uncle George"—*Morning in the Barnyard* and the "Uncle Josh" monologue. The room was filled with a high noise of chatter, laughter, resolute music, sounds from the kitchen . . . and outside, the sun sparkling off the great, untouched spread of snow across the yard and fields.

Shouts from the road, and then a running to the windows. Charlie, one of George's boys, came tramping into the house, ruddy-faced, in his sheepskin coat . . . from somewhere a jingle of sleigh-bells. The girls followed him from the kitchen, dish towels in their hands.

"Well, grandma and grandpa, do you want a sleigh-ride? Team's out here ready."

The others urged, laughing, excited, pushing toward the dining-room windows from which—through a blinding sparkle—they could see the sleigh. The young men were out there, patting the horses. They had got the Tomlinsons' old two-seated sleigh, that had been packed away in a musty, cluttered barn corner for years. It was furbished, decked with sleigh-bells the boys had found somewhere;

John's big horses stamping, shaking and turning their heads to see where the jingling came from, letting out clouds of silvery vapour.

"It ain't cold—just grand! Better go, grandma."

"Take your wedding journey!"

The bedroom was full of women laughing, encouraging, helping to bundle her into heavy wraps—shouting to George to get his fur coat for grandpa. There was discussion as to who should have the place beside Charlie. "You go, Clara," "Oh, no—some of the rest of you." "Mr. and Mrs. Baxter—" "Oh, no, no! Let some of these little people." "Me, mamma! I want a sleigh-ride!" "No, you children can have lots of fun here." "I think Clara'd ought to go. She's the only one ain't had a ride to-day." Clara would not go without Minnie. The two plump women were packed into the front seat, with Charlie squeezed between them. The old Willeys had the place of honour in the back of the sleigh.

All the company flung on wraps, shawls, whatever they could pick up, and hurried out to the back steps to watch the sleighing party leave. The women hugged their arms in their shawls, squinted against the sharp flash of sun from the drive and glistening shed roofs.

"Look-a there! Ain't that great?"

They pointed to the placard that the boys had fastened with a white streamer to the back of the sleigh—

JUST MARRIED.

"Get back—get those kids back. These horses are rarin' to go."

The clustered company waved, shouted, as the sleigh started with a jerk and frosty jingle of bells; watched it out of sight around the turn; then went back to the house, away from the white emptiness in which the new sleigh-tracks had left steely marks.

Bobs had been along this road since it had stopped snowing, making the going easier. The jingling bells, the sky a

dazzle of blue after the snowfall. . . . The world they were passing through was as shining, remote, as those ethereal, silvery hills and thickets drawn on frosty window-panes. The sunlight glittered on the horses' smooth-curving backs. The sleigh runners left narrow, hard, flashing tracks. The low rounded hills were crusted deep with sparkling white. Corn stalks, humped with snow, shone stiff and pale gold. They had to close their eyes against that blinding radiance.

They drove into Prospect—not down that little street where the old people lived, but “right through the main part of town.” People halted at the sound of bells, laughed at the placard, waved and called out greetings. The sleighing party, warmed still by the happy intoxication of the wedding dinner, responded hilariously.

“What’s this—an elopement?” Judge Brubaker shouted.

“We’ve got to stop for you to have your pictures taken,” Clara turned to say.

“Oh, no!” Mrs. Willey protested.

But she liked it—even grandpa liked it.

They climbed the sloping wooden stairs to the gallery, covered with thick soft snow. The photograph would be in the Des Moines paper. “Prospect Couple Celebrate Golden Wedding.” It would have their names—tell about the loving-cup, and Robert’s telegram. The long room of the gallery, filled with snowy light, had the same dazzle as the street to-day.

The old man was lifted above his gloom and forebodings. He raised his wife’s hand clasped in his, and shouted back at people. A crowd of little boys swarmed out into the road, making for the sleigh with ludicrous determination. “Hop on, boys!” he called jovially. They clung until a jerk at the corner threw them off the runners; and they still trailed the sleigh for a block or two.

“Well, was the ride nice, grandma?”

“Oh, it was fine!”

"Get cold?"

"Not a bit cold. . . . I guess I am a little chilly now, though."

And as she trudged up through the heavy snow to the farm-house again, she realized that the afternoon was late, the best of the sunshine over. When she went into the house, too, there was a different feeling. The big bob-load of people had left during the sleigh-ride. Now there were only the family themselves—the granddaughters sitting wearily in the parlour after their long siege in the kitchen. "Oh, children, be still awhile. You make such a racket." Carrie Gustafson was plodding about in the kitchen doing the last of the cleaning up.

Standing in the bedroom, taking off her many wraps, Mrs. Willey realized that the chill of the winter day had sunk into her. Her eyes were reddened, her small faded lips were blue. Her thin frail hands felt stiff and chilled.

"I guess you did get kind o' cold, grandma."

"Oh, not so very. It was awful nice."

They sat about in the parlour, where the grandchildren were playing with undiminished liveliness, even wilder than at noon. The older people were tired. The men talked, and the women, in two camps. Then some of the women went out to the kitchen to "set out a few things for supper."

"Now, don't go to a lot of trouble. We don't really need a thing after all we've et."

"Oh, the men'll want something. We'll just put on what's left."

But when they went to the table, the cold goose and chicken, the warmed-over potatoes, the different bits of salad, tasted good after all. There was a revived cheer, an intimacy in gathering around the remnants of the great meal after the outsiders had left. The glossy table-cloth had spots of jelly. The yellow bell still hung there; but the flowers and crêpe paper and wedding cake were gone. Plates of angel food and fruit cake, a little crumbled, were

put on. The coffee tasted better than anything else.

Under the old woman's smile lay tremulous fatigue. She could scarcely sit at the table. As soon as the meal was over, George hitched up the bob to take the old people and some of the grandchildren home.

"Well, sir, it's been quite a day!"

Now they had seen too much to notice the whiteness of the fields that they passed, the willows dim and motionless. The straw was warm under the robe on the floor of the bob. The *plop-plop-plop* of the big horses' hoofs was magically soothing . . . and the slight jolt and sway of the bob, going over rough places in the road, turning corners. . . .

They were all surprised when the bob stopped.

"Are we here?"

"Sure. Where'd you think we was?"

"Why, I didn't hardly know."

"Wait a minute, grandma, I'll lift you out."

George lifted her over the side of the bob. When he put her down, her legs felt stiff and queer, and she could scarcely make her feet move. She looked with a kind of wonder at the house standing bleak, silent, no shine from the windows, no smoke from the chimney. She entered it with the feeling of a traveller from splendid scenes who still carries a trace of their radiance with him to shed upon the familiar home. The little entry was cold.

"Wait a minute," George said. "I'll get your fire going for you."

"Oh, you needn't to bother, George."

"Sure. Only take a minute."

The sound of his heavy boots, the crackle of wood and rattle of coal, made a cheerful bustle. "There! I guess she'll warm up now." Then he was gone. Shouts of good-bye from the bob—it trundled off down the snowy street, around a corner.

It seemed as if the day could not be over. But they were in the house together. There was nothing for them to do, after all, but to go to bed.

Their bedroom was chilly.

It took the old woman longer to put away all her cherished best things—her silk dress and lace collar and brooch. He was in bed long before she was, and impatient. She wanted to linger. The silk dress kept the feeling of occasion. There was still a sense of exaltation—a jumbled memory of the dinner, the shining table, the jangle of bells and the sparkling snow, the greetings along the street.

But the old pieces of furniture, set with a meagre exactness in the chilly room, exerted the long-known influence of the everyday. After all, it was this that they must come back to. The day had been fine, but the day was over and would not come again. Now, when they were alone, they had so little to say. Their room was too close, too familiar. Their knowledge of each other was too intimate for their speech to go outside its daily boundaries—they were afraid of that. They fell so quickly into the old ways with each other. She struggled against admitting this. "The cake was nice, wa'n't it?"

"Hm?"

"The cake. It was nice."

"Um. Yeah. Ain't you nearly ready?"

"It was nice of the children to plan it for us that way, a surprise like that."

... But it was no use. He would never talk about things. He was pulling her down to the old level again. She folded away the lace collar, put the brooch in the small jeweller's box with her watch chain and an old ring. She would have liked to go over the whole day, picking out and holding up the intimate and significant details—but he wanted the light out, wanted to get to sleep. She was softened toward him, thinking of that moment on the snowy street when he had lifted their two hands. She was not ready to let the day go. Why couldn't pa ever talk things over with her? He'd talk more to anybody than to her.

She felt the still, frosty wonder of the night, as she stood a moment at the small window. And because she could not share this—felt so helpless—a little old, thin bitterness seeped through her proud exaltation, tincturing it with the familiar quality of every day. . . .

He turned over restlessly. "Well, ma! Ain't ye ever comin' to bed?"

"Well, can't you give me time to put away my things?"

"Hmp . . . 'time'!" And other mutterings, half intelligible.

But when she put out the light and climbed into the creaking bed beside him, he was at ease. He soon went to sleep. She lay beside him, awake for a long time.

The irritation died away into calm, and she lay holding in the solitude of her own mind deeply felt, wordless things . . . as she had done in countless other nights; holding quiet both the beauty and the bitterness, encompassing them in the tranquillity of her comprehension . . . not so ill content, after all, that he should drop off childlike to sleep, and leave her and those incommunicable thoughts alone.



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